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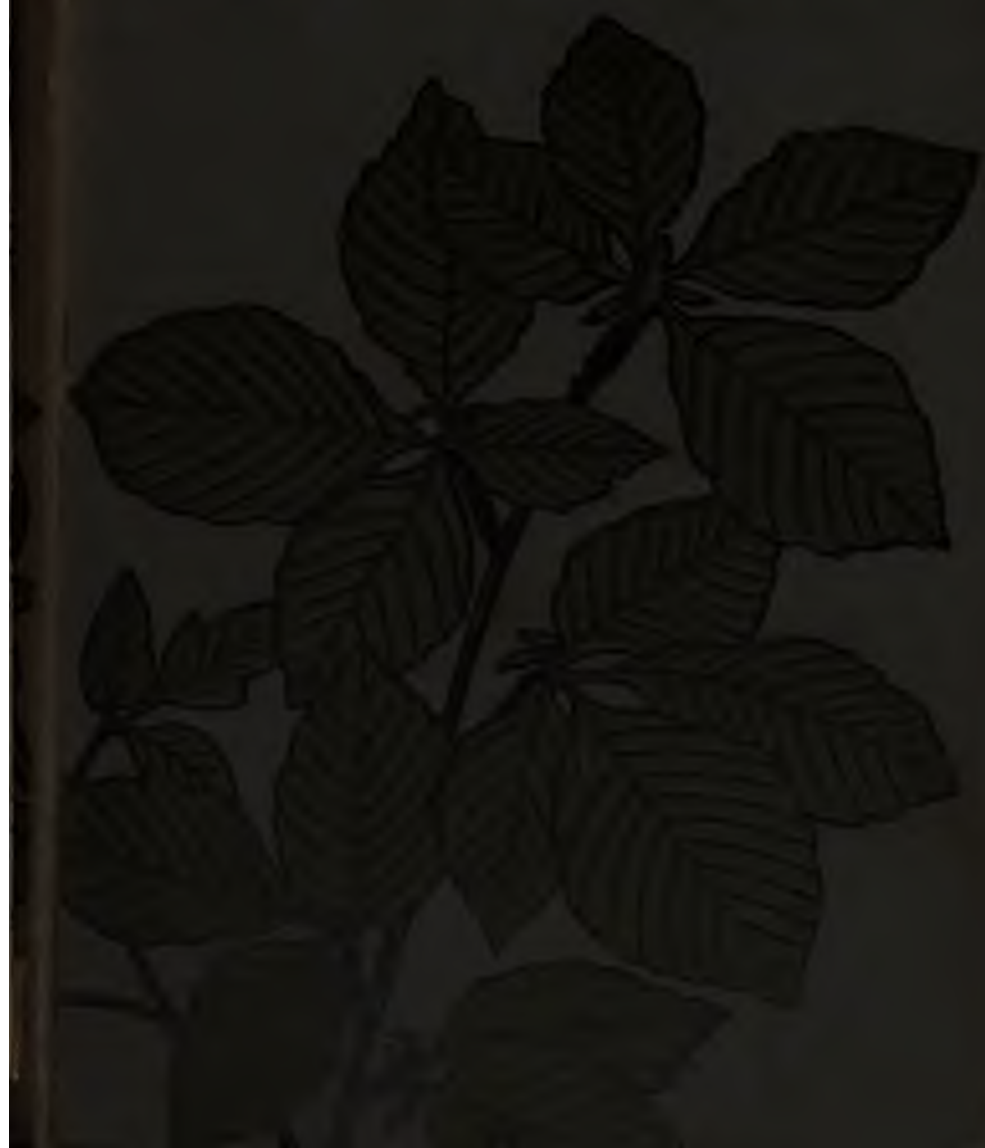
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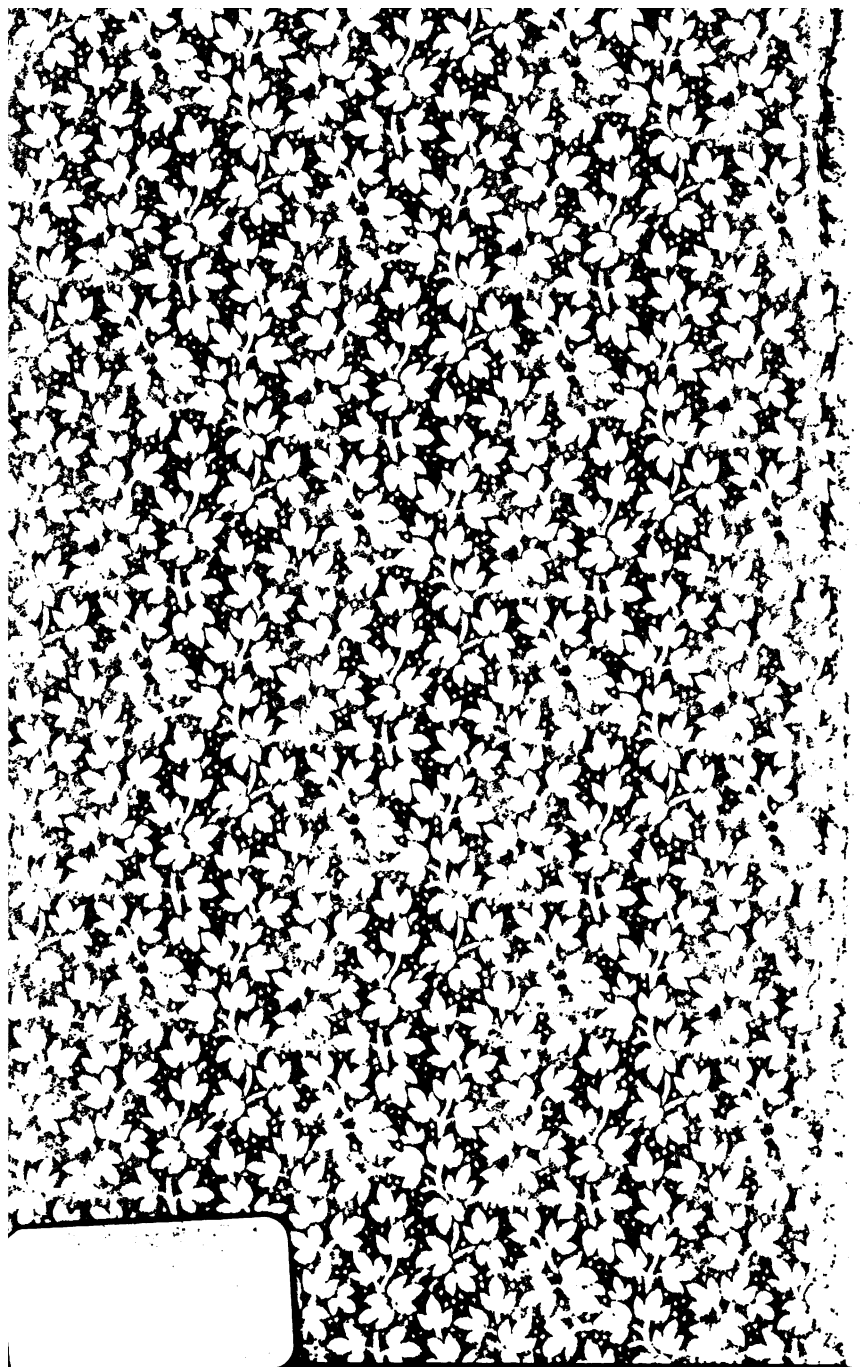
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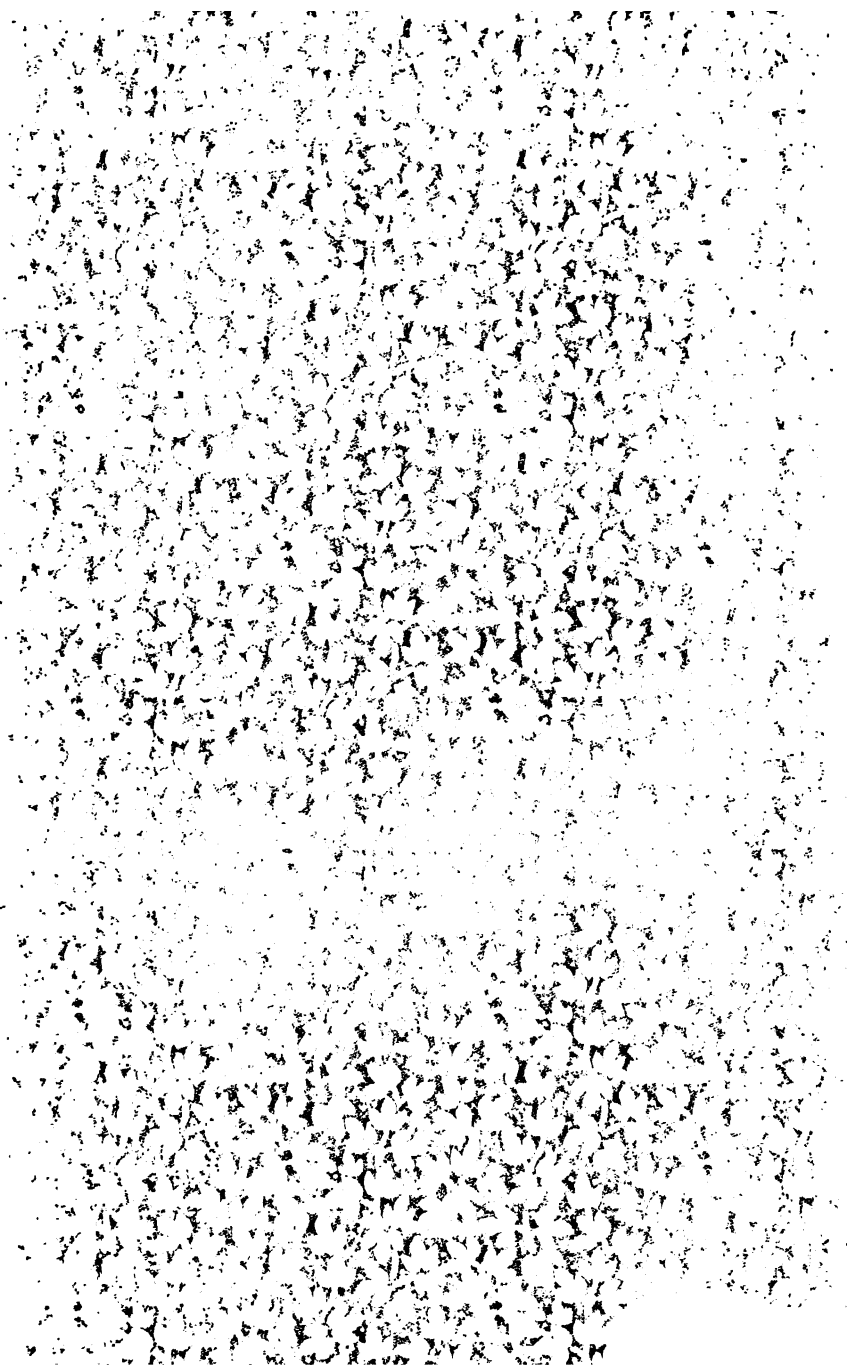
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# DISARMED









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**DISARMED.**



# DISARMED.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "KITTY."

*IN TWO VOLUMES.*

VOL. II.



LONDON

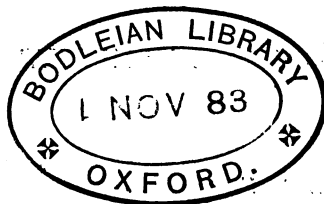
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# DISARMED.

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## CHAPTER I.

FAR and wide on New Year's Eve flashed through the dusky heavens Miss Hermitage's festive windows. Her house stood on a hill, dominating three sister heights, valley within valley, town, and sea ; and a beautiful spectacle it thus made, blazing like a beacon fire amid countless lesser lights. For no sooner was the brief winter twilight over than the lamplighter's enchanting business began. A will-o'-the-wisp here, a twinkling light as of a glow-worm there, now a cluster of little stars like the beads of a broken necklace ; and, lo !

on a sudden, magically, from east to west, earth and the broad span of heaven are set with fiery cressets. Not a space the size of the palm, above or below, without its lamp shining out of the Ethiop blackness of the night.

On this marvellous panorama, however—glorious illumination that people would have flocked from all parts to see, did it occur but once in a lifetime—neither host nor guests had time to dwell to-night. Miss Hermitage's opening entertainment was to be splendid; nothing like it had ever been seen in these parts, people said. All as yet was mystery and alert looking-forward; but on one point there could be no doubt—Miss Hermitage's promises to surpass herself would be made good. Valerian, indeed, promised these things for her; but was not Valerian Miss Hermitage, and Miss Hermitage Valerian?

The nature of the programme soon leaked out. As bevy after bevy of fair guests

alighted at the door, a sign, a whisper, a wave of the hand in a certain direction, indicated what was in store for them.

The spacious entrance-hall had been turned into a buffet and reception-room; but when the company, on arriving, broke up into little knots for tea and gossip, they caught suggestive glimpses from the wide doors of the salons as they were stealthily opened and shut. Now was seen flitting by an airy figure, in white and silver, whose feet hardly touched the ground, unmistakable votary of the dance; now an equally unmistakable queen of melodrama, dressed in the fashion of the day. Sounds, too, reached the ears of the guests impossible to misunderstand, tuning up of musical instruments, according of violin and violin. No need for the master of ceremonies to read aloud the programme. The entertainment was to begin with a fairy masque and end with a play. And soon

appeared Colette, bearing an armful of little flying sheets, disclosing what already every one knew. Yes, a drawing-room ballet, irreproachable, of course, in the matter of accessories, was to lead the way to a charming little melodrama, performed by competent actors.

A delightful bill of fare! was the general exclamation; although, in so pleasant a meeting-place, and amid such good company, nothing in the way of professional amusement seemed necessary. It was the old story of Valerian gilding refined gold and painting the lily.

Miss Hermitage was in excellent spirits. It afforded her a world of comfort to find that she could do without Arthura, that, indeed, Valerian made up for everything. In her secret heart she half suspected Arthura of some sentimental feeling for Valerian. What could moodiness mean in a girl but falling in



love? So she was well out of harm's way; and, as for Stephana and Valerian, they might both do as they pleased, by-and-by.

How much happier people are without feelings, thought Miss Hermitage, with only capacities for enjoyment! Now, all the feeling in the world could not serve me in such stead as this faculty for enjoying myself, a faculty that does good all round without the cant of philanthropy. I fill my rooms with pleasant folk; I spend money like a queen in entertaining them; and, like a queen, I am made much of.

That she was, indeed. The cynosure of all eyes, on this especial night, was the little personage in lemon-coloured brocade trimmed with rich modern lace. None of your dingy, inodorous, dilapidated old point for me, was Miss Hermitage's dictum. New wine in new bottles! To each generation its own finery!

The gown she wore was really becoming



to a spare, little, old lady, with the compactest figure in the world still perfectly agile and upright ; features, hard but neat ; hands and feet to match, beautifully arrayed in fine silk mittens, and black silk stockings with gold clocks, and sandalled slippers, after the fashion of fifty years ago.

With one hand resting on Valerian's arm, she now made the circuit of the hall, greeting her visitors as radiantly as any bride acting the part of hostess for the first time. Satisfied, and even delighted, with Valerian in his capacity of steward she had ever been, but to-night she glanced at him almost fondly, at any rate, more than approvingly.

And none could have failed to notice, as the pair thus lingered arm in arm, the strong family likeness between them. Not only did the likeness exist in build, feature, and outward appearance generally, but in voice, expression, gesture.



Worldling for worldling, idler for idler, optimist for optimist, were here; both animated with a cordial liking for life and human-kind, both ready to take and leave things as they found them, a philosophy which certainly answers in so far as our own internal peace is concerned. Such similarities, bodily and mental, we are accustomed to look for among kinsfolk, and, perhaps, no one would have noticed it now, but for the curious link that bound Miss Hermitage and her protégé together. For if Valerian possessed absolutely nothing of worldly goods, Miss Hermitage was a pauper in those things with which nature had so royally endowed him. Hers was the wealth, but his the capacity for making wealth desirable. They depended on each other, her necessities being greater than his own.

"Where is Stephana?" asked Miss Hermitage, accustomed now to appeal to

Valerian with regard to Stephana's movements.

Valerian's face clouded.

"Stephana is not always to be depended on!" he answered, briefly. "She made no promise to come, remember."

"Our frivolities shock her, I dare say," Miss Hermitage made good-humoured reply. "I want her company, nevertheless; she can be mighty agreeable when she chooses."

The musicians now began to play, the doors of the reception-room were opened, and, at a signal from Valerian, the hundred and odd guests took their places.

A few minutes more, and the curtain rose. One drawing-room ballet, mazy dance of sylphs, nymphs, and fairies, keeping time to airiest measure, is like another; and there was no speciality about this one, except its grace and gaiety. The very spirit of the dance seemed incarnate in these sportive fays

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and elfs—human creatures they could hardly be ; whilst the measures were so gaysome, that they set the heart beating quickly from mere pleasure. Nothing could be prettier and daintier of its kind ; and when the roundelay ended, and the dancers vanished quickly as they had come, there was a ring of applause. What would Valerian think of next ? What, indeed !

Whilst Miss Hermitage was receiving the compliments of her guests, and they were speculating among themselves upon the next entertainment, Stephana stole in unobserved, except by Valerian. ‘ Beautiful exceedingly ’ looked Stephana as she now made way for groups of modish beauties—starry night-flower amid the garish glomes of day ! All her dress was of the cold yet subdued silveriness of moonlight, and, like a cloud or a mist, the silveriness seemed to wrap her round, lending mystery, something unearthly, eerie

even, to features and form ever free from human ordinariness. Was she human indeed? 'A spirit, yet a woman too'? or all spirit, of the kith and kin of seraph? No compeer of those who toil and moil in the work-a-day world!

Valerian, feeling a spell of this kind, almost shrank from her cousinly advances. He wished nothing so much as to please her; but the nearer they approached each other in daily intercourse, the clearer he saw what a gulf divided them.

Hitherto, Stephana had made no further allusion whatever to the future as it concerned Valerian and herself, but to-night she seemed to verge on confidences, in need of a confidential listener. In the midst of the general hubbub of voices, they were alone, and she said, without any leading up to the subject—

"You will smile when I tell you what really brought me here to-night."



"Not a love of pantomime or drawing-room comedy," Valerian answered, lightly.

"I like to see a beautiful dance and a pretty play well enough, but my errand to-night is not diversion."

"Have you been peering into your magic crystal? Come you as a wraith, bidding me or one of my neighbours be ready to die in three days' time?" Valerian again made sportive answer, although a lurking uneasiness made itself heard in his voice.

"I came because I felt instinctively that I was wanted. You may laugh at my pre-sentiments, as you call them," pursued Stephana. "They mean, after all—at least, in this case—no more nor less than the sympathy that binds kinsfolk together. Christina is the nearest relation I have in the world. What wonder that I should be irresistibly drawn towards her in a moment of peril?"

Again Valerian smiled, although not quite naturally. There was something wrong with him, Stephana saw that.

"I trust that your presence may ward it off, then. Our cousin was never in better health and spirits in her life. Look at her!"

Stephana glanced round, and, true enough, gayest of the gay, almost sparkling in her overflow of good humour and geniality just then, was this hostess of well nigh eighty summers. Age has its heyday as well as youth, and very likely Miss Hermitage had never appeared to better personal advantage than now, with this cold brilliance in her eyes and faint flush on her thin cheeks. The time of disillusion and checks was past. Flattery meant nothing; but hopes could no longer cheat, and she could at last take life and the world for what they were worth.

"Strange!" mused Stephana, aloud; "I notice for the first time that Christina must

have been handsome in her youth. For the first time, also, I see a remarkable likeness to yourself."

She turned her penetrating eyes towards Valerian, who shrank from the gaze.

"Have you never noticed it?" she added, looking at him curiously and speculatively.

"I am no physiognomist," Valerian said, carelessly, yet with some slight embarrassment. Stephana saw it, and immediately changed the subject.

A moment more, and the curtain rose.



## CHAPTER II.

ONE drawing-room play, just like one drawing-room audience, is much like another ; and on the present occasion there seemed nothing exceptional in Valerian's choice to the bulk of Miss Hermitage's guests. They were merely called upon to smile, shed tears, and applaud, which task is within the limits of ordinary capacity. A prettier piece had surely never been written, said everybody ; and of course, scenery and accessories were beyond praise, and actors and actresses alike fascinating. Valerian's stage management was a guarantee so far. What a pity that every Miss Hermitage had not a Valerian ! Then opulency would no longer be allied to dullness and luxury, but another name for ennui.



This much for the popular estimation of Valerian's little play, that, like an April day, opened in sunshine, but towards sunset showed a leaden sky. Some scenes were, indeed, moving in the extreme, and the most obtuse spectator failed to discern that all things were not to turn out happily in the end.

There were four present, however, to whom the play seemed to mean more than graceful melodrama or vaudeville, and from the first a physiognomist might have found their faces an interesting study. It was evident that to Miss Hermitage, Stephana, Colette, and Valerian, these pastoral and pathetic situations suggested something subtle and problematic, something as far removed from the distraction and ordinary comprehensions of those around them, as the inmost thoughts of one human being are removed from another. They gazed, listened, became

absorbed with the air of those who are helping to unriddle the mystery of their own lives, to unravel some implicitly woven knot of destiny that has hitherto defied all efforts. Whilst Miss Hermitage and Stephana were spellbound by the play, Valerian's interest remained divided; from time to time he glanced at Christina, watching every change of expression and every movement, taking care all the while that his scrutiny was not observed. So intently did he peruse her countenance at intervals, that it was plain he sought there a comment on the play with which those of the crowd had nothing to do. She was his audience. For her, if for no other, the piece should mean more than an hour's tears and laughter, a new distraction added to so many.

Simple enough was the little drama which Miss Hermitage watched with entire composure, yet wholly unusual eagerness, and in which Stephana, quietly also, but painfully

intent, seemed to read a Sibylline leaf; Valerian looking on, cold, vigilant, perturbed, but master of himself.

The story opened after the fashion of an idyl. An old farm-house in Kent. Apple orchards and flower gardens round about. Two pretty maidens in the guise of our grandmothers making hay in a pigstye, or enclosed meadow. These are Molly, the rich farmer's daughter, and her bosom friend and constant companion, Letty, a poor orphan. Soon the prattlings of the girls are disturbed by a rustic swain, whose head appears above the garden wall, and whilst ostensibly making love to the portionless Letty, we soon discover that in reality he is the accepted lover of the rich man's heiress. For farmer Maple is very wealthy, and his only child is to marry a rich man of his own choosing, so he says, or none at all. The girl, however, has a will of her own, and, aided and abetted

by her confidante Letty, contrives to carry on courtship with the lover she has chosen for herself. It is as Letty's suitor, young Briarley, himself an orphan and unendowed of fortune, comes to the house. So far all is bland, sunny, playful ; but when the stern old Maple appears, the situation becomes grim and tragic. 'Tis the old, old story over again. A rigid father resolved to bend a daughter's will to his own—the one determined to be obeyed, the other as equally determined on disobedience.

Then come girlish confabulations, hurried schemes of deliverance, plan after plan, device after device ; the friendless, motherless Molly turning to Letty only in her supreme dilemma. And soon a daring plot is laid and carried out.

Letty informs her patron that her own marriage with young Briarley is decided upon, and begs, as a special favour, that

Molly may accompany her home—that is to say, to the home of her nearest relation—in order to act as bridesmaid.

“You are going to marry Molly to farmer Grouse,” she cried, vehemently, “and Jem is going to take me to Australia. Who knows if Molly and I shall ever meet again?”

The old man consents ; first, because he is extremely glad to be rid of Letty, whose influence over his daughter he resents, and, most of all, because Molly promises that on her return she will do anything he pleases.

“Only give me this one holiday, father, this one little spell of liberty and happiness with Letty, and as long as I live I will ask no more of you,” she entreats, not in tears and on her knees—she knows her father too well for that—but with playful caresses and insinuations.

So the trio set off, and of course we all know on what errand.

It is Molly, the rich man's daughter, who is married to young Briarley in Letty's place. Molly is ready to accompany him to Australia, to give up fortune, native country, paternal favour, for love's sake. And, audacious of the audacious, bravest of the brave, Letty returns alone to break the news.

"What harm can farmer Maple do me?" she said, scoffingly, "or any woman who is not his wife, his daughter?"

Of course, the temper was awful, but it passed harmless over her head. The old man could only rave and storm, and little cared she, a high-spirited, reckless girl, for farmer Maple's wrath! What really constituted Molly's sin in her father's eyes, was not the fact of her marriage being clandestine, but low. There are aristocrats in every

society ; and farmer Maple looked down with supreme contempt on the son of a village huckster, a ne'er-do-weel, moreover. Young Briarley, although pleasant and comely (good enough for a girl like Letty, who had also to shift for herself!), was not sedate, and as yet had followed no calling. What so clear as a mercenary motive on his part? This runaway match was at least no love affair on one side ; but Molly had married for love, and on love should she fare.

Letty, finding that the old man did not turn her out, quietly stayed on. She saw no good reason for going, and could thus best serve her friend by-and-by. Farmer Maple all the while insists on secrecy concerning his daughter's marriage. She is away on visits. The neighbours are to know no more.

Meantime, the young couple do not prosper. Briarley, whose chief fault is idleness, looking for a reconciliation with his wife's



father, gives up the Australian project, gets employment as a clerk, and poor employment it is, sufficing to keep body and soul together, no more. Molly's nature is not one to soften and to beautify in adversity. We must all pay for the foibles of our progenitors, and the inflexible character of Maple, the farmer, now showed itself in the daughter. Love disappointed her—what woman does it not disappoint?—and even the joys of maternity were embittered. A boy was born to her, who should be heir to the rich man's wealth, and not heir only, but the pride of his old age, as the very apple of his eye. Again and again Letty has acted the part of intercessor in vain, and she determines on a final and desperate effort now.

Not a hint is given beforehand of the child's coming, or of what had happened, but when he is a few weeks old, Letty, ever fond of plot and shift, lays her trap. Molly

has hardened towards her father, and refuses to plead her boy's cause ; so the little thing is brought surreptitiously into his grandfather's house, where he is found by him.

The climax is terrible.

The old man turns from the cradled infant as from a serpent.

"They think me a child, do they?" he cries, in a frenzy of vindictiveness and resentment, "to be befooled into harbouring those who suck in disobedience and craft with mother's milk ! Not I. Away with it, boy or girl ; 'tis none of mine ; 'tis naught to me. I have no children."

From the supplicating, insinuating Letty, he turns away, too. Vainly she holds up the child, tries to make him look at it, touch it. Then, as a last expedient, she breaks forth, indignantly—

"Heaven has not doomed you to be childless ! In calling yourself so, you do but

blaspheme!" she cried. "Look at the boy, an exact copy of yourself, and his mother is living, God be praised—is close by—is here awaiting your embrace.

Molly enters, not the soft, coquettish maiden we first saw making hay in the pightle, but a pale, careworn matron, all her father's hardness now written on her face. For the last few weeks have brought her complete disillusion. This marriage for which she had sacrificed so much has ended in an unlooked-for catastrophe. It was the fact of young Briarley's mean birth and ordinary character that more than anything else had set old Maple against him. "Base born is base born, year out, year in," he would say; "you won't gather corn from cherlock seed." These prognostications had come true. Molly is now an abandoned wife with nothing but her child in the world.

"Father!" she cried sternly and wildly,

“you cannot, you dare not disown me now ; I am no longer any man’s wife, but once more your daughter.”

“If so,” answered the old man, with a white face, “if, as you say, you are my own daughter, send away the child. Let none know that he is yours, that your name is his father’s. Then you shall be my daughter, indeed.”

There is a pause of silent conflict. How will it end? Shall the fearful bond be entered into—a child so sacrificed to the world, a mother’s duty and affection stifled and trampled underfoot? Will love triumph and holiest instinct, or self-indulgence and clinging to gross needs? No middle course is possible. No angel will interfere. The mother must either be disowned or disown!

### CHAPTER III.

THE curtain fell amid tremendous applause, and a second and a third time the players were obliged to show themselves to the delighted audience, whilst Valerian was surrounded by his friends. A thousand questions assailed him at once. Who had written the play? Who had acted Molly so charmingly? And the rustic dresses and scenery? And the music of the intermezzo? Nothing could be daintier, more appropriate! Valerian, hemmed in on all sides by these immoderate enquirers, struggled vainly to disentangle himself. He was compelled, whether he would or no, to smile thanks, make answer, explain, finally to indicate the

direction in which supper was to be found. Stephana, also, whose appearance had passed without notice in the early part of the evening, was now taken possession of by eager acquaintances, Like Valerian, she felt bewildered and unequal to drawing-room etiquette just then. But there was no help for it; she must behave as if nothing unusual had happened. In an assemblage of a hundred and odd guests, a host or hostess cannot be visible to all at once; and what with the pleasurable sense of relief from undue mental strain in the lively gratification of a goodly regale, Miss Hermitage's visitors forgot to notice her absence. The banquetting chamber, indeed, was so royally adorned with flowers and tropic plants that it was impossible to see even your opposite neighbour. All the company, of course, took it for granted that Miss Hermitage was present, by which especial azalea concealed none cared

to ascertain. The ripe, sunny wines, the delicate cates, put everything else out of people's minds.

Where all this time was the faithful Colette?

She had listened to the play with vague, uneasy gestures and fluttering movements, like a little frightened bird. Now she fanned herself, and now she plied her vinaigrette, not able for a moment to retain the same position or master her concern. No one noticed her. Miss Hermitage's guests were not in the habit of paying much attention to her quaint little musician-in-ordinary, and the play was found absorbing. When, at last, an unusually exciting moment came, and everybody's attention was rivetted on the actors, Colette stole away and hastened to her room, there to throw herself on her bed in an agony of dismay.

Where was Miss Hermitage?

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Stephana had come disturbed in mind by vague foreshadowings of evil, but the revelation that the play was to her, and the painful, nay, agonized convictions it brought, for the moment put away other thoughts. She felt dazed, staggered, blinded by the light that had flashed athwart a dark place. On recovering herself, in some degree, her first thought was of Christina. That look of hers she had last seen was fresh in her mind, and she could but connect it with some fearful passion. Love was it, or love like hate? Sorrow, anger, or the bitter vindictiveness engendered of both? Stephana now realized, as if by inspiration, what the inner warning of a few hours ago must mean. She had come to save Christina from danger, and now she realized its nature. A chasm yawned at Christina's feet, and it was of her own working. The evil following her as a shadow was a shadow indeed, a real



though intangible part of herself. The enemy, the destroyer, was here.

Impelled by these thoughts, one succeeding the other rapidly, Stephana now contrived to steal unobserved from the crowded banqueting-hall. Unnoticed also she reached Miss Hermitage's rooms—bedchamber, dressing-room, and boudoir—communicating by folding doors on the first story. The outer door stood open, and fires burned brightly on the hearth, but there was no other light.

“Christina, cousin, are you there?”

Stephana paused for a moment on the threshold, then, getting no answer, she moved forward, and glanced round. The doors opening from one room to the other stood wide, and all three were silent and deserted; but, in the bright firelight, her eyes were immediately attracted to a conspicuous object in the dressing-closet. This was the gor-

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geous lemon-coloured gown of richest brocade that Miss Hermitage had worn that evening. It had been evidently discarded in haste ; and scattered upon it carelessly, as if they were ordinary dressing-pins, lay the rich woman's famous diamonds. On the cold sheen of the silk they glittered and sparkled dazzlingly, some adhering to it, others lying on the floor, the whole strangely contrasted with the dark purple shadows of the room ; for Miss Hermitage loved warmth and sumptuousness, and this especial apartment was luxuriously curtained and carpeted by warm, soft textures of crimson and violet. Only the fire glowed, and the pale yellowish green silk, with its sprinkling of diamonds, flashed through the prevailing gloom.

“Christina !” once more Stephana called, softly.

Again all was silent, and Stephana now closed the door of the outer room, and con-

tinued her search. But Miss Hermitage was not to be found.

Stephana very quietly continued her search, now going a story higher. As she climbed the second staircase, the confusion of voices below, the strains of music, and all the various noises that are inseparable from a festive gathering, grew fainter and fainter, till, by the time she reached the second landing, she seemed to be in a quiet place. Here all was equally deserted. A jet of gas burned dimly at each end of the corridor, but no one was moving about ; and, from the obscurity and the stillness, one might have supposed Miss Hermitage's numerous household to be already fast asleep. The servants slept here on the upper story, and at that moment they were one and all regaling below. Not a sound, not a sign of life, greeted Stephana, as, grey and spirit-like, she moved noiselessly from one place to another.

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There was yet a third staircase, dark, steep, and narrow, that led to the loftiest part of the house—a small, square tower, built by its original owner for astronomical purposes. Stephana suddenly recollected the existence of this little winding stair as she was about to descend, and she now turned back in search of it. She knew that a door shut it off from the landing, but its exact position she forgot. One after another she opened, now a housemaid's closet, now a linen-cupboard, now a box-room; the right one, as usual, came last. When, indeed, she found the staircase, what was her horror and dismay to find herself forced back by a thick column of smoke! The truth flashed upon her in a moment. The watch-tower had been fired. Stephana, to whose mind this dreadful conviction brought another more shocking still, determined at any cost to reach the little chamber of the tower. How she con-

trived to effect her purpose she never knew, but will had its way. On the threshold she stood for a moment, blinded by the conflagration raging within. The pavilion was a light, airy construction, with windows looking to the four corners of heaven, and was now fairly ablaze ; whilst in the midst, wearing a loose white gown, her eyes wild and defiant, her lips murmuring incoherently, moved Christina. It was an Erinys incarnate !

“ Christina ! ” said Stephana ; “ Christina ! ”

The quiet mastery of her wonderful voice made itself felt, yet not all at once. Miss Hermitage, still holding a candle in her hand, the fatal torch that had worked such mischief, tried to resist the spell and to work her own evil will. Quick as a wild animal seeking escape from the trapper, she now sprang to the balcony, and, had not Stephana divined her intention, would, in another second, have been past all help.

The observatory had never been used, except by its originator, and only an unsubstantial and toy-like parapet protected the outer space or balcony, removed sixty feet at least from the ground, with nothing in the shape of intervening buttress or roof to break the distance.

On this terrible pinnacle, then, for a short but awful space, hung Christina and Stephana. Evil spirit wrestling with the good ! Hate and Love at odds ! Fury and angel brought face to face in supreme encounter ! Had there been lookers-on, they must have discerned something symbolical in the very appearance of this suspended pair ; for, indeed, they seemed to hang like a couple of birds in mid-air ; above them the dark, iron-black wintry heavens, studded with bright gold stars ; below, almost iron-black also, the quiet hills, the sleeping town and sea, all, like the skies, showing a thousand fiery points ;

behind them, a fiery envelope, the steadily gaining flames of the pavilion.

Stephana had never looked more radiant and spirit-like than now. The silveriness of her dress, the beautiful paleness of her complexion, the dark lustre of her eyes and hair, so contrasted with the pearliness of the skin, the indescribable serenity and sweetness, combined with something severe, in every look and movement; all these made up an apparition at once startling and seraphic. And what a contrast to the other! For if the superhuman magnanimity and inspired daring of Stephana had never shone forth more visibly than now, in a supreme moment of bodily danger; so Christina's real nature proclaimed itself in the strong light of desperation and cowardly fear. Her thoughts centred in herself only. Nothing mattered, nothing was present to her, but a danger from which death, and death alone, offered an

escape. Whilst Stephana's mind was wholly bent on rescuing another from a purely egotistical self-immolation, Christina's realized only the misery and humiliation in store for herself if she lived. There was but one to-morrow, her own ; and provided that could be eluded, the rest was not worth a thought.

Stephana was tall and slender, and her bodily strength, perhaps, hardly exceeded that of her adversary, Christina, in spite of her threescore and odd years, being wiry and agile in the extreme. But whilst the swiftness and elusive subtlety of the elder woman's movements were actuated by the frenzy of despair, Stephana was guided, nay, impelled, by a force stronger than any mad impulse. She felt, she knew, that she should conquer here, not by virtue of physical, or even moral, strength, but because she had come for nothing else.



The day that presaged evil for Christina had brought also a mandate of deliverance. Christina would be saved, and by Stephana only; how, she could not tell.

"Loose your hold!" cried Miss Hermitage wildly, bent on the only kind of rescue that seemed possible to her own mind, a plunge into darkness, oblivion, annihilation; the rest concerned her not!

Stephana held her fast; for a moment they swayed backward and forward in deadly peril, as if the next they must both vanish into the night below. No help was near. All this side of the house was silent and deserted, and the flames within were gathering. Yet Stephana's courage did not go.

"Loose your hold, I say!" reiterated Christina, "or I take you with me; and you are not ready! you are not

ready!" she repeated, with a mocking laugh.

Stephana felt herself suddenly endowed with superhuman strength. Her hold became as the grip of an armed man, as an iron chain binding the other hand and foot. Her voice, too, was no longer her own. In its inflexible accents Miss Hermitage heard the utterance of Doom, of the Avenging Angel.

"Nor are you ready," said Stephana, with sad austereness. "You must live, whether you will or no. I have come to tell you so."

Christina's muscles relaxed. She gradually let herself sink into Stephana's arms, trembling and making low moan. Her fearful purpose frustrated, she seemed the prey of a dread and ghostly terror; but of what?—of whom?

"Save me!" she cried, for a moment

shaken with passion. "Save me, Stephana! you and none other can. Save me from—from ——"

Then getting out the hateful words with all possible speed, she whispered in her ear—

"From Valerian—my son!"

## CHAPTER IV.

FAR and wide blazed Miss Hermitage's festive lights, and farther and wider now blazed the conflagration, at first supposed to be part of the convivial lighting up. Beautiful and cheerful looked the airy pavilion of the watch-tower thus illuminated, conspicuous among the thousand beacons and twinkling lamps, studding earth and sea as stars sprinkled the dusk heavens. Like a meteor, it flashed and flickered in the sight of gazers far away, dwarfing and dulling the brilliantly-lighted town below, soon making one bright point, one superb illumination in what seemed now a pitchy environment. Just as a splendid deed or a monstrous crime obscures lesser acts, whether good or evil, so the fire, for the

time and figuratively, put out all lesser lights. All was dark that winter night save the mansion blazing on the hill. For suddenly the truth became plain to the coastguardsmen patrolling the coast, and the midnight stragglers in the streets. The house of Miss Hermitage, the millionaire, had caught fire!

Then of course ensued the very commotion and disorder on which she had counted. Amid this desperate hurrying to and fro of her household, this stampede of assembled guests, as indecorous and summary as that of a routed army, this imminent peril of life and limb to every one, the author of the catastrophe was ignored. On the gay world devolved one duty only, that of self-preservation. On Valerian, as house-steward, devolved a thousand. He was bound to concentrate all his energies on putting out the fire. It would be time

enough to enquire into its origin to-morrow.

If it is wonderful how much we contrive to know of each other's affairs, still more astonishing is it to reflect on the number of events we are enabled to conceal from our neighbours. The extraordinary and often unexampled incidents, the scandals and mysteries, the shifts and extremities, that make up so large a portion of domestic life, are, for the most part, kept to ourselves. In so doing we act wisely. Existence would, indeed, be insupportable were it not for a certain reticence and decorum concerning the meaner tragedy and comedy acted on the human stage; fireside rehearsals of the more dignified dramas we laugh and weep at when becomingly represented. We are all, indeed, bound to remember that the duty of renunciation is more especially incumbent on us in the matter of sympathy. We must husband

the sympathies of the wise and the magnanimous, and not let them be squandered upon pitiful objects. Thus it came about that little of what had transpired was known to the agreeable and ingratiating sea-side world, in which Miss Hermitage had so long moved, a central figure. The house had been fired in several places, and the fire had, with some difficulty, been put out, the hostess and her strange and beautiful guest, Stephana, who were the first to give the alarm, receiving some slight hurt. Miss Hermitage was said to be mentally, not bodily, ill from the shock ; little wonder, poor lady ! every one ejaculated, and every one left cards and notes of enquiry. There the matter ended, except for a few speculations on the probable origin of the fire.

“ Miss Hermitage’s jewels at the bottom of it, of course,” said one. “ A concerted thing. A diamond robbery.”

“ That comes of having servants who are

Swedenborgians, and read Radical newspapers," observed another.

A third imputed the fire to a foreign butler whose nose was slightly awry; a fourth to a housemaid who squinted. Had an ill-looking pedlar been seen on the premises a few hours before the catastrophe, he would most certainly have been tried for arson and probably condemned; so close is the connection in most minds between darns and damnation, virtuous conduct and irreproachable shirt-fronts. No one suspected the truth, except, of course, those who knew Miss Hermitage well, Colette and Valerian; but not a word was said. Only Stephana, as yet, took Valerian into her confidence.

Next morning, the first day of the new year, she found him in the little breakfast-room, looking haggard enough after that long night of shock, alarm, and exertion. For the first time, too, Stephana noticed that he was



spiritless and depressed, whilst her own weariness seemed of the body only. One slender hand, that had been injured in the fire, was bandaged and bound in a sling, but her brow was serene, her dark eyes lustrous as ever, and she greeted Valerian with a sweet smile.

She sat down at the breakfast-table and sipped the coffee he poured out for her, glancing at him without a word. At last, as he seemed disinclined to begin, she said, with a searching yet not unsympathetic look—

“I have one command to lay upon you. Christina is going away this very day. You must not try to see her.”

“Why should I try to see her?” was the bitter reply.

“You should try to forgive each other,” Stephana said, sadly and insinuatingly.

Valerian's eyes, for a moment, showed

angry fire. The next, he controlled himself, and answered, in cold, measured tones—

“I am sorry that you blame me, my cousin.”

“What right have I to blame you, or any one?” Stephana exclaimed.

Never, in all her life, had she felt so sorry for Valerian as now.

“Can one human being judge another? But it seemed to me”—and here she looked him in the face, all the light of that transparent soul beaming out of her eyes—“it seemed to me that you might have learned the truth without having recourse to a shift.”

“From her, never. You do not know  
——”

He broke off with a deep flush. How could he pronounce the words “my mother”?

“Will you be quite candid with me, Valerian?” continued Stephana, in soft

sisterly accents. "I know how deeply you must have felt the uncertainty about your birth, and how vindictively you must, in your own mind, have accused the authors of it for the injustice done to you. Here, indignation was proper and justifiable. But there is another feeling as natural and strong, that should surely be yours also. Do you not own to it? Are you not drawn towards your mother?"

Valerian's face but hardened under the influence of these moving words. Stephana, contemplating him, asked herself by what spell she could melt that obdurate heart, subdue that intractable mood. He was hers. She was bound to do with him as she would. Yet he sat there, opposite to her, listening to her, icy cold, frozen into stony indifference.

Gazing at him then, she saw, as she had never seen it before, the likeness between the pair. It was not only Christina's son, but

Christina's very image, and second self, she now saw before her.

She moved a step nearer, and said, in the softest, most healing tones of her tender voice—

“Dear Valerian, you are not alone ; you have a friend to confide in. Unburden yourself to me.”

“And if I were to do so,” cried Valerian, desperate and vindictive, “I should have a friend no longer. You would turn from me in mistrust and disappointment.”

Then, with all those dear yet stinging recollections of Arthura rushing into his mind, with all that consciousness of treachery towards her and Stephana vividly before him, what wonder that he sought to justify himself by exaggerating a long treasured-up sense of wrong? He knew well enough that he was what he was by virtue of character and temperament, and that, however much the

circumstances of his birth might have marred his prospects in life, they had not taught him to confound good and evil.

He was first himself, a reasoning, thinking being, a man, after that, Valerian the nameless, the disowned. But having now to plead his own cause to Stephana, he seized upon a supreme misfortune, or, at least, mishap, and made it do duty for weaknesses unrestrained, self-indulgence unchecked, principle set at defiance, and duty disallowed.

"How can I unburden myself?" he continued. "You exact high motives and a spirit of self-abnegation in the least little thing. I have none of these to give you. I am a very poor creature, Stephana; perhaps no worse, certainly no better, than circumstances have made me."

"You cannot think so meanly of yourself as you say," Stephana replied kindly, though

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reprovingly. "At least, this revelation was no affair of chance. You hazarded the play, and from what motive? Not a sense of injury alone—surely more than that," she pleaded, almost passionately. "Instinct, affection, must have prompted you——"

"Say, rather, hate," cried Valerian. "Think for a moment, and blame me if you can—if you dare! What have I been to this woman—my mother, then, since you bid me so call her? A friend, an equal, a confidant? Nothing of the kind. She has used me for her own selfish purpose only, wanting no son, only a better sort of serving-man, a superior lacquey, 'ever at her beck and call. As far as serviceableness goes, we are quits. I at least have earned my wages."

"But," said Stephana, still using gentleness and suavity, "as yet you do not know all. Do not consider your own wrongs irre-

parable till you learn what her own have been."

"I know already enough," retorted Valerian, in biting tones. "No, Stephana; rid me of my hate towards her if you can and will, but ask no affection in return. Let me never so much as see her."

"Valerian!" Stephana cried, turning full upon him the subdued light of her mesmeric eyes. "Is there room in your heart for hate? If so, love will be surely pushed out. Master yourself—your worse self—and pity, even love, when duty bids."

Valerian heard in sullen silence.

Stephana, having deepest pity for him, discerning the intense wretchedness at the bottom of his mood, grew kinder and kinder, more and more compassionate. The unutterable depth of her pitiful love, not for this poor, ill-used, worldly Valerian any more than for all wretched, sinful souls, shone out of her dark

eyes, and thrilled her tender voice as she continued speaking, determined to vanquish at last.

“Do not think that I am insensible to your wrongs. I have, perhaps, exaggerated them in my own mind”—here, for a moment, the tears rose and a fine blush mantled her pale cheeks. “For wrongs may appear virtues in those we care most about, and I must have fallen into this error. I imputed to you a nobleness that you disclaim. I took yours to be a generous nature.”

Valerian listened, unresponsive, wrestling all the time with himself. He was torn to pieces by the angel and the demon that are in us all—wanting to take this opportunity of revealing everything to Stephana, throwing himself upon her magnanimity for once and for all; wishing, at the same time, to draw her nearer to him, to make her his close friend for ever by winning her confidence and her



love. Never was a better chance of righting himself in Stephana's eyes. She would have forgiven everything in consideration of a disinterested love.

"Whose son am I? From whom should I inherit generosity?" he exclaimed, once more shifting all the blame of his own conduct on others. "First make me generous, Stephana, then exact generous deeds. I am no meaner than others so schooled."

She saw that he was struggling with himself, and naturally imputed the conflict to the only problem before her own mind. Here, again, Valerian's double dilemma served him in good stead. It was Christina's son, not Arthura's lover, battling with his better nature, and to Christina's son how much should be forgiven!

She looked at him searchingly, almost tenderly, then she asked him with that exquisite directness which ever marked her speech—

"Tell me, Valerian. Do you care for me as you did in Italy?"

The question, made in the quietest tones of a woman's sweet voice, and from no mere coquettish curiosity, but the noblest, most single-minded motives, probed Valerian's nature to the very depths. He realized the final test, the palmary proof herein exacted of him; on this yea and nay must depend his soul's last lapse or bright redemption—a step upward in the paths of shining goodness and glorious truth, or deep down into the dark mazy ways of crookedness and wile.

For a moment the conflict lasted, yet how much longer it seemed! Before Valerian's mind flashed a warm sunny picture—the green heart of a woodland glade, round about close-set spinnies of larch and fir; above, the blue skies of happy France, and, happiest of all, two lovers keeping holiday. He heard the murmurous flow of silvery

currents, and, mingled with the sound, a clear girlish voice prattling of the future that belonged to both. Then Valerian's faculties suddenly quickened to a sense of reality, the past became faint, the dalliance and the dreams! and he bowed in body as in spirit before this august presence. Stephana had subdued, vanquished him, he said to himself, as he now bent down, half kneeling, to kiss her hand, she smiling without love, but full of pity and encouragement. And somehow, the uncommon graciousness of her looks and manner, and the positive glory that seemed to sit on her pure forehead and beam out of her rare eyes, made Valerian for a moment feel as if she must have cast a glamour over him, and made him hers in spite of duty and himself.

"Do I care for you?" he cried, yielding himself to the alluring thought, the supreme condonation. He was no free agent. Ste-

phana willed to fascinate him. "I am yours, whether I will or no. Yours, Stephana, to do with as you may."

She made no answer, but bending down proudly and compassionately, for she saw that there were tears in his eyes, kissed him on the forehead. A kiss that meant many things! Not love, certes, but a prophecy of spiritual amendment on his part, whose basis is love indeed, reconciliation also, which is of love's fellowship, and above all on her own, Love's essence and sublimite, divine pity!

## CHAPTER V.

STEPHANA might lull herself into fancied security with regard to Valerian, hoping, if not believing, here to have found or evoked a soul. But how to melt that kindred nature, hitherto unyielding as iron in her hands? Would Christina ever prove tractable? Would she own at last to some soft influence or tender affection? To Stephana just now came one of those phases through which all fine spirits sooner or later must pass. She could not help asking herself, any more than other noble creatures, why the sensitive must be paired with the dull of feeling, the clear-souled with the earth-born, the chaste with the gross-minded. Why should they, whose thoughts per-

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petually soar beyond the vulgar needs of day, be dragged to earth by meaner kinship? Where could she find two beings less in sympathy with her than these two, Valerian and Christina? Yet she must bear them company, share their daily life, love them if she could! Perhaps the response to such questioning is not hard to find. There is no Island of the Blest, except in the day-spring of human history. The supreme lesson of experience is, that good and evil do not dwell apart, and that to combat the evil, the good must seek it out and bear it company. We cannot cut off the wicked, but we may lessen the springs of iniquity, and so gradually diminish their numbers. When each of us takes the sins of our next-door neighbour to heart, as if they were our own, the world will be in a fair way to mend!

Not a disturbing word was breathed to

Christina till Stephana and Colette had carried her a hundred miles and more from Valerian.

"I cannot see him. Keep him away from me," was the sick woman's constant cry, for she was sick indeed. No bodily distemper ailed her, no physician had to be called in; her malady was a morbid fear of Valerian, and the medicine lay in security from him.

When at last they reached Torquay, leaving Valerian behind, she put the question nervously—

"Valerian will not come? You are sure of it, Stephana?"

Stephana sat down beside her cousin in the cheerful, spacious drawing-room, looking on to the sea, and smiled reprovingly.

"I have already promised! Do you not think I can keep Valerian away?"

"They say you can do anything you

choose," was the half-satisfied reply. "There are many things you may now do for me."

"All as easy as keeping poor Valerian away?"

"They should be, if half what folks say concerning you is true."

Miss Hermitage's eyes looked at Stephana as if fain to read her very soul.

"How much is true?" she added. "Do you have visions? Can you foresee what is coming? Have you power to look beyond the grave?"

All these questions, put in Miss Hermitage's brusque, hard way, took Stephana fairly by surprise. She was silent for a little breathing space, then made quiet reply.

"Visions, foreshadowings, insight into futurity! What are they, indeed, but so many names for spiritual gifts of the less common kind? If I see things that are hidden and mysterious to most, is it not



because I have pondered on them more? If I seem at times warned of any rare event about to happen, must not such warning spring from intuitions shared with the rest of my fellows, only possessed by myself in a more marked degree. And if"—here she lifted her radiant forehead, and serenely confronted the peering gaze fixed upon her—"if I do feel at times as if the mystery of the tomb were revealed to me, is it not merely saying that I seem to see that which I so intensely hope, that which I so implicitly believe in?"

"Stephana," cried the elder woman, eagerly, "I believe in you, although in nothing else. Lift the veil! Life I know. Let me understand what may be the meaning of Death!"

Stephana shook her head with a wondrous smile of sadness, scorn, and pity.

"I would willingly accord your request,"

she said ; " but the eyes that penetrate into the mysteries of the unknown must be pure. For what is all mystery but another name for God, and who can approach Him without a guileless heart ? Peace should be there ; love, too, and compassion."

" People can fulfil their duty without love," retorted Miss Hermitage. " I am ready to do all in my power for Valerian. Let him be. But tell me, Stephana, what is this death we all talk so much of without understanding ? Are you aught wiser here than poor little Colette, who believes that the burning of candles will save her mother's soul ?"

" You shall judge for yourself when I can tell you exactly what I have been brought to believe," answered Stephana. " For the present, I cannot, I dare not, take you into my confidence. Think for a moment. Were I to lead you, as a curious child, into a stately

palace, and to try to explain the wonderful and beautiful things I have to show to your inner eye (no less clear and bright than those you look on now, the blue sea and the sky and the shore), how would you fare when thus brought face to face with Divine truth and Love, which are as a near and solemn presence to those who abide in them? How would you fare, I say, with this darkness about your soul, this hatred in your heart? and for whom? Your own son, your very own, although born——”

“In sin, but not in shame,” murmured the other, in a low voice. Then she added, slowly, “There was a marriage.”

Stephana paused, and piercingly, although with angelic mildness, gazed on her enigmata. For was not this poor thing a very demoniac, demon-haunted, struggling against the light of truth-shining goodness?

After a brief silence, during which Miss Hermitage moved restlessly in her chair, Stephana asked, in a sad, gentle voice—

“If, then, no sin, why any shame? You say there was a marriage.”

Again Miss Hermitage turned away from the beautiful winter sunlight and the sight of the silvery sea, and tossed her head uneasily on the cushions.

“Valerian knows, Valerian guesses. It is his affair. I want you to talk to me of other things,” she moaned, querulously, half crying.

Stephana looked and listened in a painful state of doubt. She did not feel sure that Christina was telling the truth.

“It is very unkind of you to disoblige me,” she said, in the same pettish tones. “I have had a great shock. It will very likely kill me. I do want to know what you think

dying is! Dying, dying! We talk of it every day; but who knows anything at all?"

"I could give you peace would you but give me something in exchange," Stephana made answer. "You cannot have quieting thoughts, and lovely dreams, and celestial visitations, whilst you nurse an uneasy conscience."

"I am afraid of you, Stephana. Yet what harm can you do me? Why do you gaze as if to read me through and through? What do you want?"

"Only the truth," answered Stephana, almost solemnly. "This shrinking from Valerian, this unnatural dislike, this secrecy of so many years, if, indeed, it is as you say?"

"I am a common woman; what if I sinned the common sin?" Christina said at last. "But Valerian was born in wedlock."

She now sat up in her arm-chair, and spoke rapidly and desperately, as keenly

anxious to unburden herself as before she had been resolute to keep silence.

"You cannot judge me. Your young life was happier and better than mine. I had never any liberty, any love. 'Twas Eve snatching the forbidden fruit. But Colette knows; Colette shall tell you everything."

"Much is forgiven where love has tempted into wrong-doing," said Stephana; "if you loved, indeed."

"What is love?" asked Miss Hermitage, impatiently. "There is a love born of passion, that is love like hate. You are yet young; you may still know a better kind: I never shall."

"The love of men and women for each other should be lasting and sweet, but may turn to the bitterness of gall. There is other love in the world, and good and comforting it is. That should be yours now," Stephana said.

"You have Valerian in your mind. I

forgot that you two are going to marry ; that is why you want me to be kind to him, I suppose."

"Just to him, rather ; justice is the best kindness, the only kindness I am thinking of."

"Valerian will never forgive me, whatever I do for him now—never, never!"

"He will, he must forgive," Stephana replied. "But tell me one thing—why this concealment of so many years, if Valerian is entitled to his father's name?"

"The name would have shamed me and him ; 'twas a low marriage. That is why. Is not pride the devil's offspring ? Such pride was my father's and mine."

"Yours was not all the blame, then ? You were constrained to this deceit ?" Stephana asked, with pitying concern.

Miss Hermitage answered, averting her face—


"All women are not idolaters of their children. I suppose if I had cared much about Valerian, I should never have consented to the pact."

Stephana listened in silence, saddening as she heard. Christina went on apologetically.

"Kinsfolk do not love each other just because they are kinsfolk ; there must be something else to draw people together. And what could I do ? My father would have the whole or nothing. How could I have supported the child had he cast us off ? And afterwards, when I was free, and my own mistress——"

She added insinuatingly, as if here, at least, one woman must understand another——

"There were two reasons for secrecy——pride first, fear afterwards. I had already served one master, my father ; I should have had another in Valerian's father—he died before the boy was born—and I knew that





Valerian, when his turn came, would try to lord it over his womankind, like the rest. Now you have the truth; are you satisfied? But talk of something else. Put Valerian out of my head for a whole week, and then I will say that you have not been called syren, enchantress, sybil, and how many more such names, for nothing? Never mind what you say; the words you use always make me feel dreamy," Miss Hermitage added, with a grim smile. "'Tis like listening to a sermon."

Stephana humoured her, and began to talk in a low, caressing voice, that of itself seemed an incantation. Soft witchery was in her eyes, now retributive no more, but full of encouragement and gentle suasions to pure, tranquillizing thoughts.

A deeper spell, however, than musical voice and sweet look lay in Stephana's words, and by little and little they soothed Chris-

tina's spirit, and led it into far-off visionary tracks.

"You say," she began, "that you are eager for insight into the unseen world and the after-life. But the acme of knowledge is only reached by slow and toilsome efforts; and if this is true of material things, how much more true must it be of celestial ones? The beginnings of knowledge must be sought for in the actual, visible world, which we can, in a measure, grasp, and which we abide in. The sunset, the wave, the flower! Learn to understand these, as far as it is given to mortal minds to understand anything; then, filled with awe, pity, and love, with far-reaching curiosity and reverential thankfulness, let us turn our thoughts to the beauty, and wonder, and completeness that lie beyond, and of which these earthly images are but a feeble reflex. Who is humble enough to understand divine love, of which life is but the

manifestation? And so it is only by humility that we must set out on the quest, and contemplate the worm crawling at our feet and the globes innumerable, shining in space above our heads. Look at this sea-shell, lined, to our eyes, with the most brilliant colours—violet, azure, green as a dove's neck, amber, and pale gold, all mingling, and making a wondrous show. Yet these dazzling hues are no blues, yellows, purples, at all, and only appear so by virtue of a peculiar crystal-line formation. We are, therefore, in presence of one kind of beauty which is apparent, but dependent on another kind hid from us. Is it not thus with the life seen and unseen? We seem to be what we are, and we take the visible world for what it appears to be. Has not every human life a double mystery, a twofold existence—the one bright, it may be, but ephemeral, the other belonging to the Truth and the Being that are eternal?

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Break this mother-of-pearl lining : the rainbow hues vanish, the laws of symmetry remain. And so with the individual dissolution of the body called death, which is independent of the Infinite Life of which each of us are but an emanation."

Stephana continued, Christina listening, as some artless savage, to subtle music he does not understand. Soon the low, exquisitely-modulated voice and the bright thoughts and fancies, so aptly expressed, lulled the sick woman into drowsiness and dreams. Soothing was all the medicine she needed ; and what soothes like a tender voice, that speaks of far-off beautiful things ?

## CHAPTER VI.

"OUR ghost story anon!" said Mr. Constantine, when Arthura entered his room precisely at twelve of the clock on the third day of the New Year. "I have something to tell you, my Prospera. The world is turned topsy-turvy. We are all walking on our heads. You and I are dreaming, like our betters."

Arthura opened her eyes, although not more astonished than usual. Mr. Constantine would be astonishing as long as breath was left in his body.

"What? No impatient why and wherefore! No Lord 'a mercy! and All good angels save us!"

"The world has always seemed to me

topsy-turvy, sir ; and if people did not walk on their heads, would they make so many blunders ?" asked Arthura.

" On my word, a pat answer ever on the tip of her tongue ! Walking on the head has not muddled your thoughts, anyhow. But the news, the wonderful news ! I really have no breath for it all. Well, all kinds of marvels happened on New Year's Day ! The household by the sea is broken up. Valerian and his rich patroness have parted company. He is coming to make his way in London."

Arthura listened now, all expectation. Her fresh, girlish trust in Valerian was not clouded. He might be going to marry Stephana in the eyes of the world, but he was her own Valerian for all that. Love makes two people belong to each other for ever, thought Arthura ; and so think most lovers and maidens at twenty-four !

"I have not told you half the news yet," Mr. Constantine added. "The most important part of it was confided to me in the strictest secrecy. Can you keep a secret, my dear?"

"No, indeed, sir. The gist of a secret lies in the telling."

"'Tis a dead secret, then; but on my life I can't help telling you. I am tired, however. I will wait till the morrow. By the way, where do you get your ghost stories?"

"Ghosts run in my family, sir, and my step-mother has taught me several. She has an especial affection for them."

"Admirable woman! Would I had such a step-mother! Well, for your story. Be your ghost freakish, pranky, benign, hair-bristling, horrid, he is welcome. Come in, good ghost; I bid you good morrow. Kind ghost, we wait for you."

If Arthura now excelled in the art of telling

ghost stories, it was as Mr. Constantine's pupil. He had fashioned her to the business, first, by teaching her how tales of wonder should be read, and, next, by teaching how they should be narrated. Arthura was guileless of book-learning, but her apt, eager, audacious, young mind must have some aliment, and she found it here. The supernatural, the marvellous, the unknown, were to her what ordinary love-stories, boarding-school music, and clerical slipper-making are to those young ladies as yet outside the intellectual region of Wranglerships and the Classical Tripos. So, she had thrown heart and soul into her new vocation, amazed herself, no less than her instructor, by the new powers thus developed.

"A most ingratiating ghost! A most sociable, unceremonious ghost! We'll ask for his company another day. Now take up that book of wondrous little forest stories from



Germany. Read about the Ancient Bride who, on her marriage morn, was enticed away by a wizard of beautiful appearance, and, when he let her go from his enchanted garden, she found every one staring at her with amazement. As well they might, she had been away a hundred years! Open the book where you like. 'Tis all wonder, mystery, and fascination."

Arthura did as she was bidden, but ere she had read a page, the old man said—

"You may leave off, my Prospera. I am not lucid to-night. I feel already in the land of shadows you have so beautifully brought before me. And soon I shall be one of them. But not too soon."

"Why do we live so long?" he continued, after a pause. "Be warned, my Prospera. Die young, die in the full favour of your friends and the world, or inherit five thousand a year! Old age is a luxury for the

rich to indulge in, only. Remember the worst line ever penned by a great poet, 'Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.' We must buy 'em all when we begin to tumble to pieces—eyesight, feet to walk on, esprit, and if we can't buy a digestion, like the man in the story, meats are to be had requiring none. But age and penury, decrepitude and forlornness! 'Tis a picture to melt the gods to compassion!"

He raised his head and looked at Arthura with an odd smile.

"People, for the most part, take too much trouble about keeping the breath of life in them. As if life, for the mere sake of life, were worth a pinch o' salt! But the manner of life whilst we are in our prime! How many does that concern? When the tools fall from our hands, let us make way for our betters, I say! You are young, and shall greet many a sunrising; but 'tis time for me

to wrap myself in my cloak and turn my face to the wall. God bless me! And now, good night, my dear. I can sleep, I think. Rest you well."

Arthura stole quietly out of the chamber, although little disposed to close her own eyes. What, indeed, had she to do with sleep after such news? Valerian, no longer his kinswoman's dependant—Valerian, manfully making his way in the world—seemed twice, threefold her own. She realized in a moment, as she thought, the effect of these welcome disasters, not only on her lover's worldly prospects, but on his love for herself. The necessity of self-reliance, and his very isolation must draw them nearer together, reasoned the generous girl, ever judging of the springs of action in others by her own. Could this change mean anything else but the fulfilment of happy common dreams, a sweet home and toil mutually shared, daily

fare made romantic and beautiful because it belonged to two ?

When at last she did sleep it was to dream sweetly ; and next day, as she set off as usual to help Steppie with the housekeeping and the children's lessons, it was with a beaming face.

To her great astonishment, Steppie, who met her at the railway station, wore a beaming face, also. She not only smiled, she actually indulged in a near approach to a laugh.

"Dear little mamma ! Has Aunt Fanny sent each of the children a Sunday suit ?" asked Arthura.

"Oh, Arthura ! Why am I so much more wicked than other people ? I ought to be weeping and wailing in a darkened room——" here she did, indeed, break down and give a genuine sob. "Aunt Fanny will never send the children any more new frocks." An

other sob. "Aunt Fanny's gone to heaven." Then the tears ceased to flow, and the pale, pretty, careworn face brightened again. "Aunt Fanny has left me a thousand pounds!"

"Kind Aunt Fanny! You will be so much happier now," Arthura said.

"No, I shall be more comfortable, not happier—instead, more miserable. Think, how heartless of me to be able to rejoice at such a moment!"

"But you are rejoicing over the thousand pounds, not over your Aunt Fanny's death. I am sure you are as sorry as can be."

"That I am," said poor Steppie, wiping her eyes. "And oh, Arthura! I shall never forgive myself for not having finished those mitts I was knitting as a Christmas gift. There was a dense fog on the day I wanted to buy more silk, and I dreaded going out in it; and now poor Aunt Fanny"—here she

began sobbing again—"will never have her black silk mits—never, never!"

"You must comfort yourself with the thought that she does not want them," Arthura made reply. She had never seen Aunt Fanny in her life.

"Nor does she want the thousand pounds. That ought to be a comfortable thought, too," poor Steppie said. "But how I wish she had left me the legacy, and gone on living all the same! There is always something to spoil our enjoyment in this world."

"We must not be on the watch for it, then," Arthura replied, cheerfully. "We should have had eyes in the back of our heads, had Providence intended us to see everything at once. You cannot bring Aunt Fanny back again, but you can so use her money as to make us all happier by seeing you so."

"Oh, Arthura! I was never more miserable in my life."

"But people can be happy and miserable at the same moment; and just think what a comfort this money will be! Mr. Constantine shall advise us as to the investment. You will be quite rich!"

"Am I the most selfish being in the world?" cried Steppie, indignantly. "Every penny you have spent on me and the poor children shall now be repaid. Then your poor papa's debts! They are mine as well as yours."

"We will settle everything by-and-by," Arthura said. "You shall do exactly as I like, and I will do exactly as you like. That is the way to settle quarrels."

Then they reached the house. What an abode of content and animation now that Arthura was a daily visitant! No more gloom, monotony, complaints; all vivacity, fresh-

ness, grace. Thus will a bright spirit transform a dark place!

"Kisses first, and lessons afterwards!" cried the boy Walter, throwing his arms round his step-sister's neck, and kissing her again and again.

"Buns first, and lessons afterwards!" cried Benjamine, in her turn, laying a nefarious hand on Arthura's cloak-pocket. Gentlest, most docile creature imaginable, Benjamine as yet resembled those little animals so low in the stage of development as to consist of a mere sac and an orifice, skin and stomach only.

"Arthura," said Walter, "when you have taught me all you know, will you let me go to sea?"

"Why cannot you be content to stay with mother, and Arthura, and little sisters?" asked Steppie, reproachfully.

"Because you will love me twice as much when I am a sea-captain," said the boy.



“ And I want to come home with a red face, and a purseful of money, and see all the people throwing up their windows to look at me as I strut up the street.”

Benjamine laughed immoderately. Steppie called to order, and spelling and sums were begun.

## CHAPTER VII.

VALERIAN took possession of his new quarters in about as uncomfortable a frame of mind as it was possible for any human being to be. Everything had gone wrong, yet he felt obliged to confess that everything had gone according to his wishes. He had played a desperate game and worsted his adversary. He was not only master of the position, but master of himself—free to go whither he willed, to do as he would with his life. All these facts he repeated to himself, again and again, but they failed to bring reassurance. Whichever way he looked, he saw himself hemmed round by problems and obstructions, no straight, open path anywhere. His best friends in the world were these three—Chris-

tina, Stephana, Arthura. How was he requiting their friendship? A letter from Stephana lay on the writing-table, and he sat down to answer it as to a heavy task. It was the kind, confidential letter that any woman would write to a dear friend. The style could not be displeasing to him, but the gist of it lay in a question he found impossible to answer. How had he obtained a knowledge of the facts on which his play was based? asked Stephana. Was it mere supposition? Had he drawn inferences only, and acted on them? Or were the data actually in his possession? and, if so, how came they there?

Honestly or by a fraud? Stephana's question was not framed thus, but so it shaped itself to Valerian's uneasy mind; and long he sat, pen in hand, unable to indite a syllable. The explanation forced upon him must be easier by letter than by word of mouth, and he knew it was inevitable, yet he

hesitated. When at last he put pen to paper, his mind underwent one of those curious phases not uncommon in those who are ever moved by two impulses. Valerian always intended to follow the straight course, but could not help reasoning himself into the advisability, even necessity, of the crooked. He wanted to have Stephana's confidence and sympathy at any price, and at first he said to himself that this should be paid, even at the risk of self-abasement. Stephana should know the truth, and nothing but the truth. Words, however, on paper have a hard look. They put us out of countenance sooner than the same confession made by speech ; and so the first page was torn, and the second, and the third, and when the fourth was begun, not a trace of the original letter remained. Style and substance were remodelled till both became unrecognizable from the original copy. Valerian, in the first instance, had set out

with the intention of adhering to the unvarnished truth, but finally ended in romancing. The first pages, however, contained a verity.

"You will most likely be astonished to learn," he wrote, "that the earliest notion of my possible relation to Christina arose from a consciousness of antipathy, the kind of antipathy that belongs to nearness of kin, that arises, indeed, from nearness of kin. Why should people not nearly related ever dislike each other? There are a dozen reasons why those of the same blood should do so. They see their own frailties and defects, mental as well as physical, reflected, often distorted, as in a mirror; they cannot get rid of a perpetual monitor, or at least, reminder of what they would fain forget; and if the shining qualities predominate, a sense of comparison is evoked no less painful than self-criticism. So it was with Christina and myself. The shining qualities were not there,

certainly, but others as forcibly challenging comparison. I was serviceable to my protectress, nay, essential to her comfort, and she always showed consideration and open-handed generosity to me, for which I am not ungrateful. There was never any pretence of affection between us. The truth, or the probable truth, having once flashed across my mind, a thousand circumstances seemed to confirm it. I knew that one person, and one only, was in Christina's confidence. Colette might, must know, but Colette would never tell. Her attitude was always that of a mediator between her patroness and myself. She would give affront twenty times a day by interference on my behalf, always of a conciliatory nature, and always in matters of little moment. She had evidently made up her mind that at some future time, and by dint of her own efforts, Christina and I should become attached to each other. I could not

help remarking this, and it seemed to me, viewed by the light of a steadily growing conviction, evidence of secret remorse on Colette's part. She, herself, felt concerned in the wrong that had been done me, and hoped to make amends. But for some such feeling, why her apologetic behaviour, her reiterated mediations, her supererogation of friendly offices? It is my firm belief that the kindly little Frenchwoman often remonstrated with her mistress in secret, and that I formed the only subject of contention between them. Christina would not love me enough, and Colette could not make her!

"Another point struck me. Colette never seemed satisfied with our mistress's liberality towards myself. She seemed, so at least I began to fancy, as if I ought to be treated like the master of the house, treated as if I ought rather to share than serve the rich Miss Hermitage's fortune. In trifling matters

Colette would put in a word. Mr. Valerian should have his riding horse! Mr. Valerian should have his valet! I could not be made too much of, she seemed to think. We were always on the best of terms, Colette and I, and in our free and easy conversations of many years she had dropped statements I now turned to account.

"I gathered that one conspicuous incident, and one only, had broken the monotony of Christina's past life. This was a quarrel with her father, and an absence following it of many months from home. Concerning this quarrel Colette was extremely reticent. The pair of friends, the Squire's daughter and her companion, had travelled for more than a year. Where did they go? How did they occupy themselves? Such questions Colette would ever answer vaguely and with evident reluctance. Yet at times she would advert to this epoch as if it had



especial charms for her, and as if she were disposed to do so against her will. Was it that she felt the burden of a secret? Was it that she would fain have spoken out, but dared not? One or two hints she did let fall of a love affair, of Christina's determination to marry against the Squire's will, of a final reconciliation. She named no names in conjunction with this love affair, but on former occasions had often mentioned a personage whom I could but associate with it. This was the riding-master of the pair, who, somehow or other, Colette could not seem to get out of her head, although he was never alluded to in her mistress's presence. My suspicions were aroused here, and I felt that I had a clue, knowing as I did the character of the daughter and of the father also. I put these things together till a coherent story shaped itself in my mind—a runaway marriage, an after confession, a final sacrifice

of maternal feeling to pride, and for the rest, silence.

“But you will say, there was a third voice that must have made itself heard, if these suspicions were true. The lover, the husband, the father of the child, where was he? You may be sure I had pondered on this often, and many a time had tried to elicit some inadvertent explanation by throwing Colette off her guard. It was only by chance, however, that I learned more. She had been ailing from what Frenchwomen call a nervous attack, and I overheard her murmur to herself that ‘never since getting the news of Henry’s sudden death had she suffered from such palpitations.’ By the name of Henry she had always called the riding-master!”

So far, Valerian’s explanations were genuine, but he knew that more would be required to satisfy Stephana.

He added, now writing desperately, letting the words do with him as they would :—  
“ I have no proofs to give you. Had proofs been in my possession, should I have acted as I did ? There would have been no necessity for shift and stratagem. Do not blame, therefore, but rather pity me for being driven to such extremities, and what is more. Yes, Stephana, I say it for once and for all. You are said to possess subtle fascinations over your fellow-creatures. Use them now. Exorcise two evil spirits. Reconcile me to my mother if you can. “ VALERIAN.”

But what if Valerian had added a postscript, hinting at betrayed confidence and violated trust, private documents surreptitiously handled, and secret places pried into ! For he had told a part of the truth only. The basis of his play had been a fragmentary journal in Colette’s handwriting ; and of that diary and the means by which he had

obtained access to it, he said never a word. The Molly, the Letty, the sire, the swain of Valerian's idyllic play, all lived in these sentimental pages, penned for her own satisfaction, and as a relief to enforced secrecy, by a girl more than thirty years before. The outline of the story, with some reservation, was there. He had but hazarded the sequel, put in a few details, and made of the scattered incidents a consistent whole.

On the other hand, might not Valerian have urged, on his own behalf, that he had combated fraud with fraud, and forced his way as the owner of stolen treasure into the thief's house? His birthright had been filched from him. Was he not justified in using any means to wrench it from the hands of those who held it back? All these arguments, and many more, Valerian might have put before Stephana, passionately, vin-

dictively, maybe unanswerably. Because he dreaded a shadow of discredit, he held his peace when it most behoved him to speak. In Stephana's eye, at least, his conduct should appear flawless.

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE ink had not dried on the page, and Valerian lingered, seal in hand, when a clear, joyous voice called his name. How may a word find a soul's depth, as a pebble the well's bottom! In a moment he felt conscious of himself, that hidden self, dark and unfathomable to other eyes. 'Twas but his own name he heard, and a maiden uttering it; yet he stood still, hesitating painfully.

"Valerian! Valerian!" again exclaimed Arthura, no cloud on her brow, no uncertainty in her movements. The true, transparent nature shone out of her steadfast eyes, and betrayed itself in her welcoming smile. An apparition of joy and beauty she seemed, as she stood thus, an impersonation

of the daring, maidenly love that thinketh no evil.

There was wintriness in the heavens and in the air, but the warm carnations of her lips and cheek, and the touches of bright colour relieving her dress, cheered the place, if they could not cheer Valerian's heart. Undismayed by his silence, attributing it, indeed, to overjoyed surprise, she now moved to the writing-table by which he was standing. Then, with indescribable, almost infantine satisfaction, she unclosed her palm, and dropped several bank-notes on to his writing-case. Each was crumpled ; for, regarding them as far too precious to consign to purse or pocket, she had brought her treasure from one end of London to the other in her hands.

"Count these notes," she said, blushing with pride and pleasure. "There are one, two, three fifty-pound notes ; it is my whole worldly fortune, and I make it over to you."

Still crimsoning with delight, she bent over the paper money, fondling each by turns, as if in those symbols she was deciphering Valerian's future weal and her own. The mere suspicion that her lover was not at one with her, and that boundless confidence no longer existed between them, as in the matchless French days, never entered into her mind.

It must be with Valerian as with herself. Once more together, the ills of separation were surely as if they had never been. Her heart must open to his, and his thoughts commune freely with her own. Love made them artless and trusting, as children who have singled each other out for comradeship.

She babbled on blithely.

"I had hoarded up this money in order to pay the remainder of papa's debts, but my step-mother has just had a little fortune left her, and insists on paying them herself. So I



have a hundred and fifty pounds for my poor Valerian. Mr. Constantine tells me you have come to London to make your way. You will need money. You will not refuse my little all? But what is the matter?"

She uttered the last words suddenly, seized with consternation. She was now looking him full in the face; all the glow and gay-someness faded from her own, all her painful entreaty told without a word.

He stooped down, and kissed her pure forehead. What a kiss! Arthura felt chilled to the very veins; no words could have so utterly disconcerted her.

Reading that expression of dismay, once more and once more, he bent down, and touched her candid brow with his lips, Arthura waiting, pale and expectant, as a culprit to whom the next moment may bring sentence.

"You should not have brought me your money," he said at last, looking as spiritless

and unhappy as herself. He added slowly, "And you should not have come."

It was the first time Arthura had ever been directly reproached by Valerian, and the truth began to dawn upon her painfully. Her best friend was angry, nay, affronted with her. Tears of vexation rose to her eyes, and her cheeks crimsoned again, this time from shame and indignation. She might have done wrong, but Valerian of all others had the least right to blame.

"We are not in France, remember, dearest," he went on. "There are things a young lady may and may not do. You have acted generously, but without taking thought."

"I only wanted to be kind," murmured Arthura.

"Kind, kind!" cried Valerian, running his fingers deliberately through his hair. "First be kind to yourself. We are not in

Madame Henri's drawing-room at Nantes. What would my friends think if they chanced to call and find you here?"

It was a brusque, even brutal speech, yet Arthura could but acknowledge the truth of it. She realized the unwelcome conviction at once. Her conduct was not only inconsequent, but wanting in maidenly reserve. Where, however, was the love that should have risen up as an advocate? Where the tenderness that should have pardoned all for the sake of the motive? She rose proudly to go, no playful vindication on her lips now, no arch remonstrance in her eyes.

"Pardon me! a thousand pardons, my darling!" Valerian said, hurriedly and apologetically, evidently anxious to get the interview over. "I will come and see you in your home. I will tell you everything. Forgive me if I express myself plainly. I thank you heartily for your generous inten-

tions. But you should not have come. It was wrong of me to let you go on that holiday trip to France. We must be more circumspect in the future. We must have some regard to the world."

The world! Arthura stood still, with sealed lips and a pale, anguish-stricken face. For a stronger, more cruel light played on the reality now and brought it home to her. Not for the first time to-day had she fallen below Valerian's standard. He had, then, been dissatisfied with her a year ago without ever saying a word. She thought she could understand that part of his conduct hitherto mysterious, the long interval between letter and letter, the silence as to his changed fortunes, the chilling reception of to-day, the spoken, and what was hardest to bear, the implied reproach.

That little word with which Valerian's sentence finished seemed to rise up as a wall

between them. The world! What but the world had divided them from the beginning? What but the world prompted Valerian's unkindness now? Might not the world end by separating them more and more, and wearing away their love for each other? Her quick, impatient mind went farther. She thought she could date every change in Valerian's behaviour from that French holiday, and recollected happiness rose up as a Nemesis to smite her now. She was but justly punished for having loved too well. She looked at him, no longer, as she deemed, her adoring lover and closest friend in the wide world; rather her judge and discommender. At last she said, very quietly and pathetically, her mind full of the lost trustiness, and joy, and hope, and of the present blank and uncertainty.

"I know that I ought not to have gone on that holiday excursion with you. But

never let any one blame me except yourself. I could not bear it."

She went on, struggling now, not with tears, but an agitation deeper still :

"If my step-mother and the children should ever hear of it, I mean. You made me promise to say nothing of our engagement to them ; and now, if they should learn what I have done, and that you blame me for it !"

She paused, as Valerian thought, on the verge of sobs, and wishing to comfort her, thinking to comfort, he took her hands in his own, and clasped them close. But the action did not soothe, it only served to heighten the contrast in Arthura's mind. There had been a time when Valerian adored her, and now !

And a thought flashed across her mind that made her brain reel and her knees tremble. What if evil report did reach the ears of Steppie and the children ? What if

they should discover the truth, the baleful truth she saw as plain as day and believed in!

She had been very dear to Valerian, but he loved her no longer, and she had not only forfeited his love, but his esteem.

"I am the stay of the house," she went on. "It would break their hearts to have me thought ill of."

A deep blush burned on her cheek for a moment, leaving her paler than before, and the last words, which rang in Valerian's ears for days after, were rather a cry of desolation than an appeal to him.

"Oh, Walter, Walter! He must never know," she cried; then she slid down to a footstool by the side of Valerian's chair for a few moments, sobbing bitterly, conscious only of the cruel world outside her little brother's adoring love.

Her passion of grief over, what could

Valerian do but entreat forgiveness? She was his own, his very own, he said. All would come right with them in time. She must love him a thousand times more fondly than ever.

The smiter in his turn was smit. Valerian's conscience did indeed reproach him for the ill-considered words of a quarter of an hour ago. Arthura let him whisper what he would in her ear, let him clasp her passive hand, then went away, her banknotes forced back into her palm, without a smile or a word.

They could never more be to each other as they once had been. She felt it to be a farewell.



## CHAPTER IX.

STEPHANA had now reached a crisis in her singular career. She awaited a mandate from the unseen world as confidently as those who live according to ordinary methods look for the usual deliverance from a dilemma, expecting, maybe, the interference of happy chance ; maybe, a wise counsel of friend ; or, lastly, a clearer understanding on their own part. To Stephana no such solution suggested itself. She should be duly enlightened, but neither from within nor without, as far as the actual world and her own individual life were concerned. The voice, inaudible to others, would reach her obsequious ears from afar. The monition would come from no earthly counsellor.

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Looking back, and recollecting every incident that linked the present with the departure from Italy, she could understand why the last strange summons should have come in the name of Valerian. What an errand was hers! To force a lie into the light from a darkness in which it had been hid for years—to bring, as she felt she must and should, mother and son together; to sway two mundane natures to her will, and touch their careless spirits to finer issues. Here, indeed, was a mission that might well claim her life for a time. But for a time only. Stephana looked far beyond the horizon of an existence that should mean fireside concord and a perfect harmony between Christina, Valerian, and herself. When the looked-for reconciliation had been brought about between these two, and her own relations with Valerian determined for once and for all,

then, and not till then, should she begin to live indeed.

Her soul exulted and her heart danced as she contemplated the prospect, for she saw now how her supreme wishes and most cherished ideals might, one by one, be realized. Unworldly though she was, she knew well enough that wealth is the key to most doors, and that the would-be regenerator of his age and benefactor of his kind must possess not only Will, but Power; the spirit to stir the few, and the material force to move the many. She was already rich. Christina was richer still, and their combined fortunes would form a mighty engine, indeed, if only Valerian could be taught to work it aright.

Sitting down deliberately to count up the aggregate of Christina's fortune and her own, Stephana's eyes grew almost supernaturally bright, and her pale cheeks glowed with exaltation. Could she only sway Christina

and Valerian to her purpose, not one of the magnanimous schemes she had dreamed of need be given up. The accumulated hoardings of the Gossip-Hermitage house would, at last, be appropriated to noble uses. One chapter of their family history, and that a sordid one, were thus closed for ever, and a shining page begun !

“ I do believe your riches burden you as much as an evil conscience. It is no crime to be born a millionaire ! ”

Miss Hermitage had often made this remark to Stephana, and in a measure it was true. The enormous and, for the most part, idly squandered wealth of her kinsfolk did lie like a heavy weight on Stephana's mind. She could not charge herself with undue softness and luxurious living, and Mr. Constantine's money had served the public weal, rather than his own interests. But the expensive, the lavish Christina ! the wine that

sparkled in her crystal, the outlandish cates that furnished her table, the gauds, the frivolities, the merry-makings from day to day! Such a spectacle filled her with a feeling akin to despair.

And although she exuberated now in the thought that this had come to an end, and that, at least, Christina's life would never be mere child's play any more, she could not yet see how all the rest that she hoped for was to come to pass. How was this hard nature to be made malleable, this iron will to be subdued? But Christina at one with her, Christina moved to an unselfish or single-minded impulse! Then Stephana's own path as a social reformer would be smoothed, and not one of her bright dreams but might be realized.

Two immediate purposes, therefore, at this moment occupied Stephana's thoughts. She must first reach Christina's conscience,

then touch her heart ; begin by reconciling her with God, and end by reconciling her with Valerian. All as yet was dark about her path. Christina was feeble, fretful, yielding in small things, but unapproachable on the subject of her private affairs and Valerian.

For the first time in her life, Stephana failed to fascinate and influence as she willed. That strange power exercised by her over her fellows, and hitherto regarded by all who knew her as irresistible, seemed inert or inadequate. Less the power than the will, indeed, was with Stephana now. She felt strangely alienated from her kinswoman just when excessive pitifulness would have served her purpose better. One of those subtle antipathies witnessed among blood relations was at work here, and, do what she would, Stephana could not wholly overcome it. Thus it came about that her eyes seemed

cold, her voice unsympathetic, to Christina. The wondrously insinuating sweetness and soothingness that had always appeared part of Stephana's self, were gone, and a certain pensiveness had overtaken her. The cheerfulness, the animation, the subdued fire of other days, vanished also.

"We are all very dull," said Miss Hermitage one day. "I do wish, Stephana, you would persuade your blind friend, Mr. Markham, to accompany Colette and myself to Italy. Italy always amuses me, and Mr. Markham is poor. He would consent, I feel sure."

Stephana suddenly became her old sportive, seductive self.

"Dear Christina," she said, seating herself at her cousin's feet and holding her hands, "will you let me cozen you into one thing, a very little thing for you? Mr. Markham will do anything I ask him. But I must be bribed into the asking."

"You want money out of me for what you call your causes," Miss Hermitage replied, smiling ironically. "Well, how much? A hundred pounds?"

"The cost of one of your gala gowns, a few exotics! Is Mr. Markham's company worth no more?" Stephana continued, still gay and genial. "No, cousin! A hundred pounds is so small a sum to you that it is not worth bargaining for. What I want now is no more nor less than five thousand pounds."

"You are dreaming!" Christina retorted, with scorn. "Much good would five thousand pounds do in your hands. Philanthropy does no good. We see it every day. The more rich people give away, the more poor people there are."

"There are other things to be given away besides soup-tickets and flannel petticoats," Stephana replied, in her turn caustic and bitter; "though I do not know that money



is worse squandered on these than on strawberries at Christmas!" She added, with playful scorn, "Then you will not give me five thousand pounds?"

"You are dreaming!" was the ironical reply. "But be serious. Write to Mr. Markham. Make the proposal to him. I must have him in Italy."

But Stephana shook her head.

"It is really unkind of you, Stephana," said Miss Hermitage, fretfully. "You seem to take pleasure in thwarting me, although you are amiable to every one else. I will write to Constantine, then. He can surely find some one entertaining and clever to go with us to Italy."

"You will not think me unkind when you know everything," Stephana answered. "I cannot tell you yet."

"Always dark and oracular! Well, Colette shall have my trunks packed, and off we will

go by ourselves. This humdrum life is killing me."

No more was said. Preparations were made for the Italian journey, and it seemed to Stephana that all chance of the desired reconciliation were over, at least for a time. The travellers proposed to start in a few days, not to return till the spring ; and where then would they find Valerian ?

Not in England, certainly, thought Stephana ; and as she pondered on what had just taken place, the first strange phase of the life she had planned by Valerian's side wore a look of comfort. Under no large southern stars and warm azure skies, amid no orange and lemon groves, should their days be spent, islanded from ice, and frost, and common cares. A hard lot for awhile must they lead ; yet as she pictured it now, her heart bounded. At least there would be sympathy in that home in store for her ; the serviceableness

born of joy and gratitude, and the devotion that breathed through every line of Valerian's letters augured well for the future. He loved her, and she could only give a hearty affection in return. But had either of them the right to be dissatisfied with such a compact? The best part of life is made up of thought and deed, not sentiment, held Stephana. "I have had my romance, my delusion. He insists on having his. 'Twere hard, indeed, were we not henceforth able to leave off dreaming and live indeed!"

## CHAPTER X.

It was the eve of Christina's departure. The trunks were packed ; the courier had arrived. The paragon of a cicerone found by Mr. Constantine was expected every moment. At noon next day the little party, consisting of half a dozen persons, would be on the road.

Miss Hermitage had not been so enterprising since the occurrences of New Year's Day. She still liked travel for travel's sake. Novelty in the most ordinary circumstances diverted her. A prospect pleased, if for no other reason, because she gazed on it for the first time. The serving-maids who waited on her for a day only were always delightful. Unaccustomed meats, irrespective of quality,

tickled her palate. In fact, like many another, she would have declared life perfect if one day never resembled its predecessor. The mere prospect of getting away from England even now was alone enough to put her in spirits. She was leaving Stephana and Valerian behind, and in Italy there would be no embodiments of conscience and retribution. There her history, past and present, could concern no one. In whatever delicious place she might halt, she was but one rich woman more, to be welcomed, and pampered, and bent knee to accordingly.

Travel, if it does nothing else for us, at least brings out the amiable aspect of money. Wit, beauty, distinction, all outward insignia, here vanish. We are not men or women, hardly human beings—mere money-spenders.

Picturing to herself all the pleasant little nothings that were now to be her daily portion, Miss Hermitage was suddenly discom-

posed by one of those phenomenal storms that happen from time to time in mid-winter; sleet and hail coming close upon thunder and lightning, and a lurid sky and heavy air oppressing us when the logs crackle on the hearth.

Miss Hermitage could never relish storms. She liked nature, as well as humankind, to be always in a bright, careless mood. A summer tempest in February seemed, moreover, so abnormal as to prognosticate evil hap. There were the cold, white flakes falling and the lightning ablaze at the same moment; whilst the iciness of the atmosphere was suddenly turned to sultriness and languor.

"I am suffocating! Will no one relieve me by opening the windows?" she cried, fretfully.

Colette and the maids flew to do her behest, but it was beyond their power. A wild wind sent the sleet swirling madly in all

directions, and drove it through every aperture into the room. It was necessary to make the windows doubly secure. Some dire mischief seemed imminent. Not only the especial congeries of buildings in which they lived, but the whole town, seemed threatened by the storm. Wind and thunder, hail and waves—for the sea was in hearing—made up a horrid tumult, whilst the vivid flashes of lightning but heightened the prevailing gloom. It was broad daylight, yet it was night. The dog days had come in winter!

Miss Hermitage knew no fear, but the storm perturbed her, and gave a sensation of eeriness.

She could not shake off the old rustic superstitiousness in which she had been brought up, and which ever associated phenomenal occurrences with especial interpositions of the Divine displeasure. This terrific

hurricane, she knew, could but be working all kinds of disaster by land and sea ; and why should it happen just when she was on the point of hiding herself from conscience and duty, fleeing from them to lazy pleasures ?

Must there not be some visitation here, some portent, pointed at herself ? The rocking of this solidly-built house on its very foundations, the din and clatter within, the elemental hurly-burly without, not frightening her in themselves, inspired terror of another kind. The voice of the thunder reached her inner ear, the lightning endowed her with spiritual vision. Yes, she saw it now. Stephana was right. She had been wicked towards Valerian ; she must make atonement. It was characteristic of Christina that such thoughts should not have troubled her till now, and that, so long as she felt her secret absolutely safe, she in no wise concerned herself about the sin. It happened in her case,



as it often will, that the verdict of others made the wrong-doing apparent, brought conviction to the culprit. She had seen her conduct in its proper light by the aid of Stephana's rebuke. Yet, until now, although humiliated and put out of countenance by good opinions forfeited and daily existence unhinged, the lapse in itself had brought no contrition. The unpleasant consequences lost to sight, she should go on living after the old plan, she said to herself, and the world would be as easy and agreeable as if there were no Valerians in it.

Swiftly and unawares, however, by means not of human suasion or interference, but, as she interpreted it, an awful monition of nature, she was troubled with a feeling akin to remorse. She should start for Italy on the morrow all the same. She felt no qualms of conscience at quitting Valerian without a word of adieu, but she would make some

sort of satisfaction to Stephana. All the money she wanted, as Miss Hermitage supposed, for Valerian, she should have, and that ungrudgingly.

“Where is Stephana? Will no one bring Stephana to me?”

The query was made in a pettish voice again and again, but without response. The appalling nature of the storm, indeed, and its extraordinary grandeur as a spectacle, were occupying the minds of her household. The men had so far forgotten decorum as to quit their posts, and seek some better vantage ground out-of-doors; the women had separated into two detachments, the timid hiding themselves in the cellars, the valorous watching the lightning on the sea from the attics.

Formerly, and under ordinary circumstances, Miss Hermitage would have overlooked such neglect, for she was the easiest

taskmistress in the world, always making allowance for her servants when in quest of amusement. The more amusement they got, the better their work was done, she would say. But she was no longer her old self. The shock of that unforgettable New Year's Day had left her nerveless and feeble ; it seemed a personal grievance to be thus left alone when any storm-gust threatened to force in the windows or bring down the tiles. She was shivering from cold, too, for the fire had been allowed to burn low, and the oppressiveness of a quarter of an hour ago was changed to chilliness ; whilst for a few minutes the flashes of lightning were awful in their vividness. Not twice in a lifetime do we behold a like spectacle—the broad span of heavens and the troubled deep as if in one vast conflagration, hardly a perceptible interval between blaze and blaze, hardly a lull between peal and peal,

heralds, it might be, of doom to many both on land and sea.

Miss Hermitage rang the bell, but that summons was unnoticed ; then she went to the foot of the stairs and called Colette, but no Colette came. Something must have happened, she now said to herself ; some one of her household, perhaps, had received injury from the lightning. How unkind of Colette not to come to her !

In this momentary dejection she realized, for the first time, the awfulness there may be in solitude. She was troubled in mind, and she was alone. What if harm had happened to Colette ? She should then be alone, indeed—alone for the rest of her days as she was at this moment. How different it might have been ! Affection might have been hers, and all kinds of domestic joys. These things were out of her reach now, but she would fain make her peace with Stephana

—Stephana, who understood how the debts of conscience are acquitted; Stephana, who seemed, to her imagination, an embodiment of Justice, blindfold, with scales in her hand. Could she but satisfy Stephana, she should be able to enjoy herself in Italy, as in the old days.

At last, Colette did come, the faithful little woman appearing out of breath and out of countenance.

“Why do you leave me alone?” said Christina, querulously. “You know I am not well. A very little thing upsets me now. And the fire is very low. I am shivering with cold.”

“I have been looking for Stephana,” replied Colette, apologetically. Then she put a shawl round her friend’s shoulders, and piled up the fire with logs.

“What is Stephana doing? Why does she not bear us company at such a

time?" asked Christina, in the same fretful voice.

"Stephana cannot come," Colette said, mysteriously.

"Then let us go to her. Why should she shut herself up in the midst of a storm like this? There is positive danger for every one of us."

Colette still looked enigmatic.

"The storm is abating," she said. "I have told the maids to come downstairs and prepare tea. But Stephana cannot come."

"Has anything happened to her, or to anybody in the house?" asked Christina, sharply.

"What should happen?" was the reply, accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders. "We must do without her company for a time, that is all."

"I am sure something strange has come to pass. Am I not to know?"

"Strange things are always coming to pass where Stephana is concerned," Colette made reply, with an odd smile. "Let us take our tea cosily and watch the storm-clouds divide. See the lightning. How it diminishes!"

But Miss Hermitage would not be quieted. She would go to Stephana, she said. Something had happened of which Colette dared not tell.

"Indeed, and indeed, no harm has come to her," Colette replied. Then, finding that the other was determined to see for herself, she followed her upstairs.

## CHAPTER XI.

THERE are certain temperaments, without doubt, so sensitive to atmospheric changes, as to give credence to, if not to warrant, the strange theories formed on the subject, and Stephana's was one of these. The superlative grandeur of the storm acted no less upon her imagination than the phenomenal conditions accompanying it affected her physical powers. For a brief spell, she surrendered herself to a double influence—the one rendering her mental faculties abnormally alert, the other diminishing or subduing bodily force, subjecting it momentarily, not to will, but to something that may be even stronger. At such moments, when given up absolutely to phantasy, spiritual vision—call her mood by what



name we please—Stephana would be as unconscious of the actual world as an infant in sweet sleep. The storm having taken possession of her spirit, the physical encumbrance remained inert, the bodily faculties in abeyance; and although the sublimity and awfulness of nature in this rare mood were apparent to her vaguely as in a dream, to all else she was irresponsive, and indeed, insensible. Called by name at such times, she did not hear; wrapt in an ecstasy which others could not understand, she was deaf, blind, numb to the visible material world. And once in that dream-world whither none could follow her, she must be waited for as some bird that has soared into cloudland, but will duly return to its nest. It was this habit of abstraction that, perhaps more than any other characteristic, made Stephana an enigma to her friends. What could so absorb her mind as to render it dull to actualities,

and why should she thus voluntarily lend herself to speculations having such a result? For, said all, she was mistress of herself; she might overcome this mental habit if she would.

But Stephana had every reason for encouraging thoughts and fancies more beautiful by far than those steeped in realities. She was a silent poet, one of those choice spirits that are intoxicated with spiritual and intellectual beauty, and at the same time alive in every fibre to the warfare between good and evil disturbing the tranquillity of the world. The loveliness revealed to her inner vision entranced, dazzled, but the sorrow that followed a contemplation of life as it is dimmed her eyes with tears. Compensatory are ever the higher gifts! If Stephana suffered much more than her fellows, because she realized more intensely the bitterness of sin and wrong, at the same time, hope and goodness

shone upon her with intenser, mellower light. She sorrowed more, but who rejoiced with equal fervour? And just as the inner vision consoles the poet, and reveals to him a world of loveliness that is as a reflex of this, yet far more lovelier, so Stephana, poet without a lyre, had consolations for her own especial sorrows of which others knew not.

When Christina and Colette entered the room, she met them with her usual smile of welcome; and, except an extraordinary brightness in her eyes and an unusual pallor on her cheeks, there was nothing to denote the crisis through which she had just passed.

"I was coming to you," she said; and again she smiled and looked at each doubtfully, uncertain as to the effect her disclosure might have. "Whilst you have been watching the storm and the sea, I have been gazing on light and darkness more awful still. But sit down, and I will tell you everything."

The heat, precursor of the tempest, had led her to exchange a violet pelisse for a white woollen morning gown, in which, with her black hair loosened from its comb and falling about her shoulders, and her eyes full of quiet fire, she looked like a priestess fresh from communion with her gods. No pythoness inflamed with wrath, and impelled to utter direful malisons, was here ; rather one of those calm, beautiful beings whose mission it is to speak words of benign and hopeful presagement.

"Sit down, one on each side of me," she said, all expansiveness and douceur. "You shall hear what I have seen."

The pair obeyed, not loth. It was the first time that Stephana had opened her lips to either on the subject of her dreams and phantasies, and now she sat down and told her story as if it were an ordinary narrative.

"The storm came upon me quite by sur-

prise, as it must have done upon yourselves," she said, leaning forward in her chair, and seeming to see the things she described. "I had thrown off my heavy gown and opened my window, overcome by the sudden sultriness, when a wondrous flash of lightning, such a flash I had never before witnessed, drove me back. I sank into my chair, trembling not with fear, but emotion. The sight of the dark sea, and the lightning playing upon it, was majestic, indescribably awful! The present, and all that was taking place now, passed from my ken. I gazed, but not on tangible things. I hearkened, but to no earthly voice!"

She covered her eyes, as if to shut out all that could interfere with the vividness of the mental picture she was drawing, and went on.

"It was as if the fair face of the earth had vanished from my sight, and instead,

I saw light and darkness only—light so dazzling, yet so lovely, so splendid, so beneficent, that I seemed now to gaze upon it for the first time, whilst the darkness filled my soul with terror. No words can describe it. A darkness swallowing, engulfing every luminous particle that approached it, a darkness striving to encroach upon the confines of light. As I gazed and gazed, I discerned a broad shining track dividing what foreshadowed to my mind not only day and night, but life and death, time and eternity. This luminous path, the end and beginning of which I could not see, was garlanded on either side by troops of angelic figures. Most beautiful and terrible were they—all those sentinelling the kingdom of light being of its very essence, starry, radiant, ineffable, with rays about their seraphic brows and a whiteness more dazzling than silver or Alpine snow upon their wings; whilst the

legion guarding the realms of darkness were as night incarnate, fearful to behold, blackness on their foreheads, ebon of wing, sable raimented, fit harbingers they of a night that should never see any dawn, children of the death that has no beginning and no end.

“I gazed and gazed, and by-and-by discerned the occupation of these angelic battalions. In gazing down into the abyss in which the fair, broad way was lost below, and high into the heavens where it vanished also, I now saw what I can only describe as flames or small wing-like apparitions fluttering upwards.

“Once having made out their presence, as it happens to star-gazers, I soon saw twenty where before I had seen but one, and by-and-by the space between the two regions I could see was filled with them. Fluttering feebly they came, some lighter and more conspicuous than others, none wholly dark,

and each moving hither with free voluntary movements like those of a bird. I discovered also that each of these small wing-like flames was followed by a light and a dark angel, who seemed striving to entice it, the one to the right, the other to the left. As I gazed, I discerned that when any one was drawn close to the boundaries of the light or the dark kingdom, straightway it became absorbed. Then the light burned brighter and brighter, the gloom grew more and more intense. But that especial little flame was lost to sight, merged either in the supernal day or night.

“Strange and moving was it to see this contest going on, and the transformation brought about; these myriads upon myriads, with their attendant ministering spirits, attracted now nearer the light, now towards the borders of darkness, at last absorbed by the one or engulfed into the horrible abyss



of the other. There was music, too ; whence it came I knew not, but it reached my ears from afar and alternated, now exultant and joyful, a bridal song, a triumphal march, a jubilant chorus, now sad as a dirge or funeral knell, so sad that I wept to hear ! I was weeping thus, when suddenly I heard a voice anear, and, without daring to look up, knew that it was one of the seraphic spirits sent hither to comfort me. ' Weep not,' he said, in a voice sweet, but awful ; ' gaze, and be instructed. To the mind of man, much of the knowledge he desires is denied him, but thus much know and teach others. In yonder track of light, see prefigured human life, which is but a warfare between shining goodness and dark sin, each unit of the multitudes born on earth fighting under one banner or the other. If it is ordained that the life after the tomb remain an enigma for earthly sojourners, and all, except life itself,

is mysterious, at least know that the soul vanquished by evil makes the sum of universal darkness greater and more portentous, whilst the gain of the humblest spirit to truth and loveliness is as another ray of light beaming, not only on this world, but throughout the entire universe, and not only to-day but always. Ask not then earthly, much less heavenly rewards, O children of men! Is it no reward to have added to God's best gift, man's best heritage, Light, for ever and for ever? ' "

Little was said at the time, but Christina thanked her cousin warmly, and Colette's tearful eyes afforded grateful comment.

The next morning, the projected departure took place without unusually affectionate adieux. About an hour afterwards, however, Stephana found a note on her desk. It bore the well-known lozenge, with Christina's

initials and motto underneath, "For one and the world." There was no letter, but the envelope held merely a slip of paper folded round a cheque. The draft was for five thousand pounds, and on the slip were written these words :—

"Save my soul by your prayers !"

## CHAPTER XII.

A FEW days after these events, Valerian suddenly appeared at Steppie's door, just at the time Arthura was at home. Steppie was the first to perceive him in the distance. She was one of those persons who could never so wholly absorb herself in any occupation as not to see and hear every trifling thing going on around her; and the distant glimpse of Valerian was caught whilst she busily cast up her housekeeping books.

"Oh!" she said, half crying. "Misfortune on misfortune! I said that a series of calamities would happen when I overturned the inkstand on Benjamine's white frock this morning. Mr. Hermitage, Arthura! and the maid out for a holiday, and the drawing-room

curtains taken down to be washed, and no fresh butter for tea, and Baby's last clean pinafore stained with blackberry jam, and my best gown at the dressmaker's, and Benjamin's hair in papers for to-morrow's Sunday-school treat, and Walter playing at leap-frog in the street with the baker's boy! Oh, dear! Arthura, you must battle with it. I am ready to sink into the earth!"

"Dear little mamma," said Arthura, proudly collected in spite of strange beatings of the heart, "I will let Mr. Hermitage in; and, meantime, do you tidy the children and bring them downstairs as soon as you can."

"But for you to answer the door! Let me do it!" said Steppie, beseechingly.

"Mr. Hermitage will not expect to see a powdered footman," Arthura made sarcastic reply.

Then came Valerian's knock, and the next moment he stood on the threshold,

catching sight of Steppie, dragging a child by each hand, on the staircase.

The lovers had not met since the painful interview of a few days before, the very thought of which stung Arthura to the quick now—Valerian had wounded her past forgetfulness, if not past forgiveness, she said—and the prospect of a talk with him afforded scant pleasure.

"Can I say a word to you?" he said, glancing at the door.

"Certainly," Arthura replied, and she could not resist a smile in the midst of her bitter thoughts. Who should hear anything they might say, indeed?

There were audible indications enough of what was going on in the chamber overhead, had not Valerian been too self-absorbed to hear them. Baby wailing at having her face washed out of season, Benjamine clamouring for a clean tucker, Walter throwing off his

shoes, a general running hither and thither, unlocking of drawers, and a prevailing hubbub and commotion.

Valerian glanced at Arthura's calm face with no little apprehension. He had come to make excuses for himself, and to beg pardon for the unwarrantable behaviour of the other day. But, seeing her cold, collected demeanour, he hardly knew how to begin.

"I have come to say many things to you," he said, not venturing even to repeat the hand-clasp. "First and foremost, I was to blame in speaking to you as I did. Pray think no more of it. Forgive me!"

"Certainly," again Arthura said.

To Valerian's ears the word had an ill-omened sound. Arthura was not wont to be monosyllabic. Her speech most often resembled herself—bright, sparkling, individual. But that frigid affirmation! That—"Certainly!"

"When I explain all to you, I am sure you will make some excuse for me," he went on, feeling that he must go on, whether he made matters better for himself or worse. "I have had many things to harass and perplex me. Let me first of all tell you one. I have come to say good-bye for a time. I start to-day, at midnight, on a journey to America."

Arthura looked inquisitive, but not melted. Surprise, however, did win from her a genuine exclamation. She forgot for the moment everything but the delightfulness of seeing a new world.

"Are you really, really going to see America?" she said.

"You speak as if you would like to see it, too. And, indeed, that may well be, some day," Valerian went on, relieved at the sudden naturalness of Arthura's voice and manner. "But I must make haste, my darling. I have so much to say, and so little time to



say it in, that I am at my wits' end where to begin. Well, I am going to America on an errand for Stephana, and may be absent three or four months, not more. Her grand schemes you shall hear of in my letters. You will see me back early in the summer. I will write to you by every mail."

Arthura listened with no responsive eagerness, yet kindly, he thought. Yes, she loved him still!

"All sorts of things have happened impossible to write about. Did Mr. Constantine tell you? I am Christina's son, born of a secret marriage. My name is a humble one, but, such as it is, honestly mine."

That piece of news evidently gave Arthura real pleasure. Her cheeks showed gratulatory blushes. Her eyes sparkled.

"I had not heard a word of this. I am glad, indeed," she said.

"The revelation has not mended my

fortunes as yet," Valerian went on, grimly. "What my mother's intentions are I know not, but at present I am a mere pensioner on her bounty. I must make my own way."

Arthura broke in with flaming cheeks and hot tears.

"You are going to America on Stephana's account. Tell me the truth, Valerian. Are you going to marry her? Mr. Constantine says so."

Valerian looked ruffled and discomposed, but, recovering himself in a moment, pleaded his cause with wonderful dexterity.

"Listen to me, my dearest," he said, speaking in a low, confidential voice, and persuading himself that things were with them as in the sweet French days. "Long before I saw you, I gave Stephana to understand that if she could ever marry again, I should be proud to make her my wife. It was a bold proposition on my part, but she was

ever so beautifully kind to me, and so gracious withal, that in any case I felt sure of giving no offence. There was no question of love, only cousinly affection, and (at least on one side) an esteem almost reaching to veneration. You know Stephana; who can resist her?"

"Who, indeed?" Arthura exclaimed, still agitated. "If Stephana now wishes it, you will marry her."

Valerian laughed scornfully, at the same time not loth to let his supposititious infidelity take the shape of fatalism.

"No," he said, speaking slowly, as if anxious for each word to dwell in her memory like a promise. "I shall marry you, or no woman. But for a time I am in a charmed circle. I do Stephana's bidding, whether I will or no. You cannot suppose that I wished to undertake this journey to America, and thus absent myself from you,

and keep my future plans in abeyance for three months? But I cannot refuse Stephana—firstly, because she casts a sort of glamour over me; and, secondly, because she is my good genius, the best friend (I am here speaking from a worldly point of view) I possess. If ever justice is rendered me by my mother, it will be Stephana's work."

Arthura was silent. Valerian could not tell whether or no he had convinced her. She did not, indeed, know herself. But he certainly had made some kind of explanation.

"You see, my own love," he went on, "I am driven against my inclinations to accept Stephana's behests. What have we two but love and hope, and who can live upon these alone? Do not be cast down. I am sure that all will come right in time. Only you must think kindly of me and believe in me. Promise that."

He drew her towards him and kissed her

on the eyes, a true lover's kiss, but it hardly cheered Arthura. She sat still, looking on the ground.

"It makes you happy to be with Mr. Constantine?" he said, after a time. "You will write to me cheerfully. And who knows how soon Fortune may smile on us after my return, how speedily we may be able to realize our wishes! You do love me, you do forgive me, do you not? I hardly knew what I was saying when I spoke so roughly to you. Your coming was such a surprise, and such a vexation, seeing how ready the world is to rail at those who disregard it. But all is with us as before, now; is it not?"

He looked into her eyes with a lover's admiration, certainly without a lover's confidence. How superb in her girlish bloom and strength was this once sparkling, audacious Arthura! All the strength was still there—the self-reliance, the courage, the will

—but something was wanting he fain would see.

“Say that it is so, or that it shall be so,” he said, desperately. He had never been more in love with her in his life. “I need not say it to you, who love her, Stephana’s designs, spells if you will, are all beneficent. But were it otherwise, were the toils spread about me, wizardry indeed, I would break them, for your sake. Over my love for you she has no power.”

Just then there was a clamour of children’s voices at the door. Their interview was at an end.

### CHAPTER XIII.

"WILL not Mr. Hermitage have some tea ?  
It is quite ready."

For it was Steppie who had entered, followed by the children, all beautifully dressed in honour of their guest ; Steppie herself looking too youthful to be the mother of the tall girl clinging to her skirts.

"Come, children, you remember Mr. Hermitage, who pulled Benjamine out of the water at Margate ? Say, 'How d'ye do ?'" she said.

Then the little party went into the next room, Steppie presiding over the tea-pot, Valerian cutting bread-and-butter for the children with charming urbanity, Arthura growing genial by Walter's side.

"I must congratulate you on your improved appearance," Valerian said, addressing himself to Steppie. "It does credit to the London climate; you were very ailing at Margate."

Steppie's complexion, fairest of the fair, showed to-day a tinge of rose. She looked, as she was indeed, in blooming health.

"Ah!" she replied, sighing. "It is my misfortune to look well. No one pities me for my poor health and low spirits."

"My dear madam," said Valerian, "you are really deceiving yourself. There is no such thing as low spirits."

"I wish I could think so," was Steppie's desponding answer. "Were it not for low spirits, I could be the happiest creature in the world. I was born with a melancholy name—Sadgrove; but when I changed it, matters did not mend at all."

"The fact is," Valerian went on, "you



but mistake the effect for the cause, low spirits for the misfortune that produces them. Now I will tell you, with your permission, how you may get rid of this incubus."

"Do, do!" cried Walter, clapping his hands. "Oh, Mr. Hermitage! if you cured mamma of her low spirits, we should all jump for joy."

"My pathology is of the simplest," went on Valerian. "Of course we all know that nothing goes wrong without a cause. When a wheel creaks we oil the spring. When we break a limb we get a surgeon to set it. And so it is with what we call low spirits. We either want a doctor to physic us, or we drink a kind of water that disagrees with us, or we sit in a room that does not get sun enough. The consequence is some bodily disorder, which straightway, because we don't know its name, we call low spirits."

"Let us get mamma a different kind of water to drink!" shouted Walter.

"You must try not one remedy, but all," Valerian went on, speaking with perfect gravity. "Some people cure themselves by chopping wood. Their muscles are called into play, and the exhilaration extends to the mind. I knew one lady who was restored by going every day for a month to a children's hospital, and amusing the little patients by making grimaces. She quite lost the habit of looking woe-begone, and found that it had been nothing but a habit."

"But to rise every morning with the feeling that life is a burden?" asked poor Steppie. "I should like to get up gay as a lark."

"Will you let me advise you?" asked Valerian. "Then, lose not a moment. Join an amateur dramatic society. You would be obliged to play a variety of parts, and would

soon begin to regard them as real. So if you were melancholy one day, at least you would be gay the next."

"That is a good idea," Arthura said. "Yes, little mamma, we will do it. It will amuse us all."

"I am sure I hope so," Steppie made pensive reply. Nevertheless, she brightened up whilst the subject was being discussed, and promised to learn a part if Arthura would arrange everything. Valerian had given a happy turn to the conversation; and when he rose to go, after the friendliest meal, with such kindly admonitions to Steppie on the score of her health, such genial interest in the children, such affectionate appeal to Arthura, they had one moment on the threshold to themselves—how could she choose but believe him? He loved her. He would be true to her. Absence would draw them nearer to each other.

That night, before Arthura returned to her post, Steppie caught her hands, and whispered, reproachfully—

“Oh, Arthura! why did you never tell me? Mr. Valerian is in love with you. You two will surely be married some day.”

Arthura flung her arms round her step-mother's neck, with tears and blushes.

“Dear little mamma, he made me promise never to tell. That is why. It made me very unhappy to deceive you, but I could not help it.”

“I like Mr. Valerian; I am very glad!” was all Steppie could say, as she fondly caressed the clinging girl.

“You like him! yes, but will he be good to me?” Arthura asked. “You are more experienced than I. Tell me, Steppie, may a woman trust a man? Are his words to be relied on like Scripture?—the words he says when he is in love, I mean.”

"Your papa was true and tender as a woman," answered Steppie. "But for the rest I cannot answer. I have been all my life terribly afraid of men. I should never have married at all, but for your poor papa's persuasions."

"You were happy?" asked Arthura.

"No, I was never what is called happy in my life, but that was not your poor papa's fault. Had I cried for the moon, he would have fetched it down for me."

"Or tried to do so," put in Arthura.

"Yes, that is what I mean. There are husbands who will do that, you know, and others who will not."

"And do you think Valerian belongs to the first category, little mamma?"

"Ah! you put me a hard question. But you would never cry for the moon, I am sure."

"Would Valerian be kind?"



"What matter, so long as you are not foolish," was Steppie's reply ; and so they parted.

"Hoity, toity, tum !" was Mr. Constantine's exclamation as Arthura entered his room precisely at twelve of the clock. "Well, my Prospera, there is one who wields a mightier wand than any of us. Stephana has got five thousand pounds out of Christina, as I live ! 'Tis past belief, 'tis miraculous, 'tis witchcraft !—but 'tis true ! I have myself seen the cheque. And tidings heaped upon tidings ! Valerian lunched with me to-day, and is off to-night to Liverpool, there to set sail for America."


Arthura waited expectantly. Doubtless she was to hear that part of Valerian's story he lacked time to tell.

"If it were not for my fourscore and odd years, I would willingly go, too ; for," added the old man, leaning forward and speaking

with unusual fire and animation, "the world may call Stephana mad, and her schemes froth and emptiness; but, mark me, my Prospera! 'tis she who alone is sane, and the rest of us are brainless idiots. Let these detractors rave as they will at her Utopias beyond sea! I, for one, as I sink into the grave, will raise my voice on her behalf. Have you heard nothing?"

"Nothing of Stephana's schemes, sir."

"Five thousand pounds! Hum! I wonder how the little woman felt when the tooth was drawn out. Matchless, incomparable Stephana! Five thousand pounds from Christina, as I live! Well, my dear, they'll call Stephana mad; but never mind—we will drink to the health of her earthly paradise. Valerian's errand, then, is to choose some fair tract in America, which Stephana means to colonize (she gives ten thousand pounds herself; but that is as a drop in the ocean to



Christina's five!) ; and the colonists she sends thither will find themselves in as strange a world as the gay Greek and his companions who were whisked up to the moon. Poor little London children! To call a garden their own, to find apples ripening in the sun for them! Seven Dials, then, or, at least, a section of it, is to be transported beyond sea. Houses and lands—we may indeed say, souls and bodies—given to those who have hitherto been but misery incarnate. But more to-morrow. It wearies me to talk.”

Arthura read a page or two, but Mr. Constantine was too full of Stephana and her schemes to listen just yet.

“Remember my words when I am out of your sight, as I must soon be. Stephana may fail, may do foolish things with wisest intent ; but she has caught the spirit of the age to come ; she realizes the moral standard of the future. For, first, have we seen force



putting the chaos of human society into order ; next, charity working blindly enough, yet alleviating the sum total of misery. Now has come the turn of sovereign justice, of conscience instead of self, to speak to each man's soul, and make him feel the full measure of his own responsibility as an inheritor of the past, an enricher or despoiler of the future. Ah me ! would I were younger ! Yes, this is the real sadness of dying, the bitterness of the grave. Just as the world is slipping from under our feet, we see the dawn of the better day we have struggled for and believed in. But your wand, my good Prospera ! Waft me far from realities, into shadow-land—away ! away ! ”

Soon he was drowsing indeed, and Arthura stole away, not herself to sleep till the cold, wintry morning dawned greyly, and the foggy streets were astir.

What is outward gloom to a young, hope-

ful heart? The first sight that caught her eyes was a letter lying on the table, a last farewell from Valerian, pencilled as he drove to the railway station.

"Yes," the girl said to herself, "I must, I will forgive him, since he loves me still!"

She sat down, and wrote a note to await him on his arrival in America, that should at least atone for the coldness and unbendingness of yesterday.

"What am I," she thought, "that I should set myself against forgiveness?"

## CHAPTER XIV.

SUMMER had come, and of the four million hearts beating in London, none exulted like Stephana's. Her fondest wishes were about to be realized. Valerian, having successfully accomplished his mission, was on his way home. Christina would also reach England in a day or two, and was willing to be reconciled to her son. Her blind friend Markham had fulfilled the behest laid upon him, and found a thousand souls willing to go unto "an isle as yet unknown, and yet far kinder than their own."

A week more, and the ship chartered to transport her colonists to the New World would set sail. Such a departure was not to be passed over as an event without a mean-

ing; and that sombre old Kensington mansion, with its lawns and shrubberies, before dedicated by Stephana to more solemn uses, was now to be given up to an exuberance of felicity. A place of reconciliations, a place of benison, consecrated to hope, trust, and thanksgiving, surely here, if anywhere, should joy-bells peal on the summer air, banners wave in the blue sky, garlands within vie with the bowers without, and loud, triumphant music drown the noises of every day.

Stephana loved the display that symbolizes a generous truth, and she was now spending upon a single entertainment as much money as Christina in her palmy days had spent upon a season. What, indeed, with the guests about to take up their abode in the house, and those invited for the festival only, the sumptuary business was onerous, but a bagatelle compared to the less substantial part of the celebration. It must be

brilliant, it must be emblematic, it must be picturesque ; and as no Valerian was by to anticipate her wishes, she had to do the imaginative part herself, finding such subordinates as she could. Song, dance, a fairy masque or allegory, these formed but a part of the programme which was to be carried out on really a splendid scale, the whole ending with a banquet under tents.

Busiest of the busy, Stephana yet found time for audiences, one visitor after another being admitted to the presence-chamber.

The first to come was Markham ! Alas for the eyes that could not behold his sovereign lady ! The mistress of the house, unable to lose a moment of the too precious time slipping away before the eventful day, was occupied in making angels' wings, emblematic employment for one who only wanted wings herself to be mistaken for a seraphic being. The whole picture was lost

to her blind adorer ; but let us console ourselves with the thought that, maybe, he conjured up a vision even lovelier. Stephana no longer wore white for mourning, but over her morning dress, pure as snow, had thrown a shawl, of the warm red colour worn by blissful angels in old pictures. . The richness of this glowing scarf, contrasting as it did so strongly with the clear paleness of her complexion, lent almost an unearthliness to the calm, pure features and the dark eyes, now full of repose. She had carelessly placed on the back of her chair the last piece of handiwork, veritable wings, pearly, iridescent, ethereal, although fashioned by human hands, and of no celestial down. Winged, then, she was indeed, a fair apparition, alighted, as it seemed, for a moment only, ready the next to take upward flight.

But Markham, whatever pictures he may have had before his inner eye, saw not this

one; only the sweetness of Stephana's voice reached him where he sat.

"What ought not I to do for you?" she began, gaily. "You, who have moved mountains for me. But I am ungrateful of the ungrateful. Expect scant thanks."

He sighed.

"Thank me as little as you please, only do not banish me from your presence."

"What can you do for me?" asked Stephana, in the same bright manner. Then recalled to the painful thought the speech might call up in her listener's mind, she added—"One thing already occurs to me out of a thousand. You can hear my masqueraders repeat their parts. A rehearsal is to take place this very afternoon, and no one is here to give judgment on it. And then—and then—But let us talk for a little first. Report on your mission."

"Do not hurry me, dearest lady," he said,

with a little sigh of satisfaction. "The work of months cannot be told in as many minutes."

"Hold this ribbon for me, then," laughingly interposed Stephana. "Let it slip gently from your fingers as I draw it. That is right. Now begin."

Well pleased, he began —

"You will not be surprised to learn that I found some difficulty in convincing these good people of your favourite dictum—the Golden Age lies before us and not behind. Indeed, they would have nothing to say to a Golden Age at all. Some thought me mad, others a charlatan or a knave. None, at first, regarded me as their well-wisher. I had been their friend once, when I sat down in courts and alleys and told them stories! But now that I wanted something of them, 'twas a wholly different matter; so hard is it for any ill-used human being to accredit another with a perfectly disinterested motive."



"My poor friend!" ejaculated Stephana. "You were not reviled, hooted, pelted with mud?"

The blind man smiled pathetically.

"My misfortune protected me. Had I been as others are, I might not now live to tell the tale. At first, then, the apostle of your Golden Age was only scoffed at for his pains. My best friends of the crowded London courts listened in contemptuous silence. The wags made fun of me. The cynical jeered. All rebelled against the good fortune you would fain force upon them. But as soon as one fact became clear, and the guiding principal of your scheme was made plain as day, then the tide turned."

He touched with the hand a roll of parchment that he had deposited by his side on entering.

"It was a happy thought of yours to exact some title of honour, some proof, if not

of gentle birth, at least, of Nature's nobility, from these poor folks. To be sent into a new country and made a man of, because you have only one shirt to your back, is a kindness that humiliates. To be promised food and shelter for your children, because you have not been able to provide them yourself, galls, even whilst it brings a sense of relief. But to be made to feel that, naked as you are, and starving, and desolate, you have yet earned these things! Ah! the blood tingles proudly then! The eyes no longer seek the ground. The man feels himself a man indeed!"

He unrolled the parchment on his knee, and, as if he knew its contents by heart, with one hand holding Stephana's ribbon, the other fingering the scroll, went on.

"I have had the list made out alphabetically for the sake of convenience, but let your eyes light where they will, you are sure

to find a bit of writing emblazoned in colours and gold. This is one, I know, it comes almost first in the list :—‘ John Ames, waterman, married, father of nine children ; jumped into the river on the occasion of a collision at imminent peril of life and limb, and rescued a fellow waterman from destruction.’ Another should be here :—‘ Alice Ashe, seamstress, unmarried, ‘unfortunate ;’ supported by her toil a paralyzed child, not kith or kin, a neighbour’s dying bequest, for eight years.’ A third is not far off :—‘ Thomas Beamish, no occupation in particular, but brought up as porter, married, with children ; nursed one neighbour after another when an epidemic raged in the court, and, although up night after night, refused a halfpenny.’ Yet one more :—‘ Ralph Calderwood, tailor, fathered the starved, ill-used child of bad neighbours, although he had four of his own.’ “And yet a last :—‘ Peter Clarke, a shoeblack ; fought

another lad for ill-using a stray dog, and took charge of it, although half starving himself.' "

Stephana smiled, although tears were in her eyes.

"You have got together a band of heroes," she said.

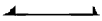
"Alas, no ! But what other heroism can one expect ? These poor people, then, when they discovered that none would be sent to the new world at your expense, there to found a family, without some kind of claim to such exceptional good fortune, became converts to the notion at once. It was no longer an affair of Government emigration and pauperism. The good deed, the chivalrous act, the sober career, and, note well, the intellectual supremacy, were to be rewarded. A certain Job Fearon you will find somewhere chosen for having invented a new button ! A button to be the saviour of human temper henceforth and for ever !

Once on, this immortal button can never come off, from shirt, shift, or trew! Well, the chosen were now envied, the rest moved to emulation. I could have found you twenty thousand candidates instead of one."

"Has every name its blazonry?" asked Stephana; "each man, woman and child such title of honour?"

"Yes! there must be prizes for every one in our school. To create no jealousies, I have had the qualifications of every head of a family printed in gold and colours, although I was obliged to make certain negations stand for virtues—for instance, the fact of never having been in prison, never having begged in the public streets, and many others. But some day you must go over the list."

"And are they happy?" asked Stephana. "Does the prospect of well-being warm their hearts?"



"Ah! easier is it to make the wilderness to blossom as the rose, than to make hope grow suddenly in the place of despair! But have no fear. All will go well if we do not run into extremes and materialize instead of invigorate."

Stephana was silent for a minute or two; then she asked, still speaking in the same elate tone—her voice seemed almost strange to him in its joyousness—"Your heart is in this work, is it not? You will soon visit your little colony?"

He grew on a sudden, gloomy, almost to moroseness.

"After so many months' absence, may I not at least enjoy your company for a little while? Have others so absorbed you that you have no room in your heart, even for a faithful friend?"

The implied reference to Valerian was not to be misunderstood, but Stephana felt

just now too happy to be even so disturbed.

"Let us think of nothing, talk of nothing, but this most joyful event," she said, in her sweetest manner. "You will come every day till it is over? You will help me as you are doing now?"

"I own the unwinding of ribbon is an occupation I delight in," answered Markham, not without a touch of good-natured irony. "And there are other things I have learned to do without eyes."

"Your accomplishments shall all be called into requisition by turns. But there is the luncheon bell. We will lunch without loss of time, and then, if you will preside in my place at the rehearsal, you will render a service indeed."

She freed herself from her silver and rainbow-coloured wings, and, taking his hand, led him into the dining-room, fragrant with

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freshly-cut roses. The repast was gay and charming. Markham's composure was fortunately not disturbed by the sight of a third cover. It had been laid for Valerian, whose arrival might now be momentarily expected. Like Markham, he had accomplished his mission ; but, unlike Markham, he was looking for reward.



## CHAPTER XV.

THE expected arrivals, however, did not take place that day nor yet the next. When the morning of Stephana's fête dawned, neither Christina nor Valerian had appeared. No wonder that a smile of dismay rose to Stephana's lips as she reviewed all she must do in the short day—receive a long-absent lover, bring about a difficult reconciliation between mother and son, entertain a thousand and odd guests, preside at a long and ceremonious banquet, deliver a farewell discourse, and how many more duties lay to hand! But she was too happy to do more than smile at such a prospect. She had, indeed, never in her whole life felt so buoyed up with hope and joy. Looking back on the

occurrences of the past few months, it seemed as if heaven had been almost too kind, and some cloud must soon obscure this dazzling sky, or else the poets had not fabled who sang so movingly of man's allotted bliss on earth. What had she willed or even desired, but was about to come to pass? One of the many darling schemes of years was already in part realized, for, happen what might, now at least she had rescued a thousand souls from a life, if not of despair, without looking forward. The fair world was about to smile upon a thousand more of her brothers and sisters, and one spot in it more, transformed into a sphere of free manly struggle and endeavour. This achieved, how many other tasks she had to do! Nor did it please Stephana less to contemplate the deed as part of Christina's doing, and the effect to-day's events might have upon her cousin's mind. Christina was to be brought

face to face, for the first time, with the philanthropy that wears the shape of a conviction and a brotherhood. She had given alms all her lifetime; to-day she was to learn the meaning of poverty, and also of brotherly love. Would her mind be impressed? Stephana hardly knew.

There was, of course, another person uppermost in Stephana's mind that morning, as she so beautifully arrayed herself for the matchless celebration. Valerian! How was it with him? Here she could but indulge in the brightest hopes also, for Valerian's service had of late not been of the lip only. He had shown her by the devotion of the past few months that he was willing to share her aspirations as well as her fortunes, and that to the best of his ability, if not as yet from the heart, he would further every one of her schemes for the amelioration of their fellows.

But devotion of another kind? How was

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Stephana's mind affected at the notion that Valerian was come home, a happy lover, to claim the guerdon of his mistress's hand? She could here accord Valerian praise only. His letters, whilst breathing the most loyal devotion, were all that she could desire, reserved, dignified, respectful. The fact is, he had obeyed her injunctions to the letter, writing rather as a kinsman and a friend than a suitor.

Judging Valerian by his deeds and his written words only, therefore, Stephana felt more confident in him than she had ever been, and kinder towards him, too. Yes, he would make an admirable steward of her fortunes, and a tower of strength, by virtue of his worldly wisdom and shrewdness, to a dreamer like herself. She should not regret the promise she had made him, although it must sever her from another friend dearer still. Every heart, indeed, was to be made

happy but Markham's! This last thought was soon put away, "for, after all," reasoned Stephana, "my friendship shall do almost as much for him as love could do, had I love to give." With such thoughts as these, Stephana dressed herself almost like a bride, but for spiritual not earthly bridals. This pure white robe, these white flowers on her bosom and in her hair, were worn for no love that claimed her as its own, no union of heart and heart; rather for the infinite love she bore all the world, and the marriage of hope and joy in a thousand hearts about to be celebrated that day. Most beautiful she looked when at last she came out of her chamber—"a spirit, yet a woman, too." To-day, in spite of that joyousness beaming in her eyes and playing about her lips, the spirit predominated over the woman.

Hardly Stephana's self seemed there, rather some starry apparition that wore her

likeness, destined to vanish with the rare occasion calling it into being.

If Stephana's brain was busy whilst she thus lingered in her tiring-chamber, what shall we say of the thousand and odd invited guests occupied at the same time in a similar manner? Christina, Valerian, Arthura, had their own thoughts, not to speak of the rest of Stephana's expected visitors. The day was to be an epoch in the lives of every one.

"Oh, Arthura!" cried Steppie, as she went upstairs to dress first the children and then herself; "I feel so happy—I mean so miserable! I should be overjoyed to play the part of Hope in Stephana's allegory. But my heart is heavy as lead."

"You had better leave it at home, then, little mamma," Arthura said, her own heart now beating with wild hopes, now sinking within her. "We must be happy to-

day, whether we will or no. It is our duty."

"I am sure I always try to do my duty," sighed poor Steppie; "and I certainly have felt less depressed since beginning to learn the part of Hope in the Masque. I have even felt sometimes as if my low spirits were going altogether, and I was turning into a kind of Hope. Only to-day the old feeling comes back. I could sit down and cry. What if I should break down?"

"People never do break down," Arthura said, authoritatively. "You could not break down if you tried. The words will come of their own accord, as they do to actors on the stage."

"Well, actors do not break down, certainly," Steppie said, drying her eyes, for a tear or two had come; "and I suppose some are as nervous as myself."

"Everybody is nervous, of course," again

urged Arthura. "The Queen, when she has to make a speech, the speakers in the House of Commons, and all the rest. But they say what they have to say, so really nervousness is of no consequence."

"Then you do not think my tongue will cleave to the roof of my mouth?" asked poor Steppie.

"I have provided against such an emergency," Arthura answered, gaily, and forthwith produced a little silver pouncet box full of pastilles. "We will all take one of these just before our speeches begin. Then our tongues cannot cleave, you know."

Steppie looked somewhat consoled.

"But there is another dreadful thing that might happen," she said. "What if my wings fall off just at a critical moment, or my wreath gets awry? People would laugh, and I should feel ready to sink into the earth."



"We will make wings and wreath secure enough, never fear," was Arthura's reply. "Although, when anything of the kind does occur, it is invariably looked upon as part of the performance. Nobody, at a play, ever laughs out of season."

"That is certainly Balm in Gilead," Steppie made answer.

And then the wonderful business of dressing began, a business the children would never forget as long as they lived. To discard the gear of actual real life, and put on the semblance of cherubs; to wear golden coronets, and garments soft as samite, silvery white; to have azure-tipped wings and badges embroidered with stars; above all, to carry little lutes on which they had been taught to thrum a joyous note or two! How superlative, how unforgettable was all this!

Arthura went into the minutest particular



of each dress, giving Baby's hair a more cherubic curl, Walter's sky-blue mantle freer folds, Benjamine's coronal of roses a more careless look. As to Steppie, when all was finished, she declared that she did not know herself.

Arthura's own appearance mattered little, she said, since she was going to help Stephana generally, without taking any part in the pageant. In spite of remonstrance, she put on no white dress, but something that suited her far better, that indeed transformed the mere handsome girl into a majestic woman. It was a black gown, yet a summer gown, being light as gossamer; whilst, by way of adornment, she wore magnificent roses of deepest, richest red. Of the same colour was the fan in her hands, and the silk cloak thrown over her shoulders.

"Dear Arthura," said Steppie, embracing her when, for a moment, they found them-

selves alone. "You will to-day see Mr. Hermitage! Are you not very happy?"

"I should be, I suppose," Arthura replied. "But remember, we are only friends in the eyes of the world."

"All will surely come right now?" asked Steppie, anxiously. "Mr. Hermitage is free. He will marry you now?"

Arthura, by way of reply, merely kissed her step-mother, and gathering up fan, gloves, and bouquet, prepared to go.

"We must think of other things to-day," she said. "And now I had better make haste and see how Mr. Constantine looks as Time. The carriage will be sent back for you and the children, and I shall be at the entrance on the look-out."

"If you could only convoy us! My heart fails me at the last."

"Dear little mamma, scold that foolish little heart. I promised to Mr. Constantine

to be at hand in case a finishing touch is necessary."

"Could we not wait for you in the carriage at the door?"

"That would never do. The household is invited, and none are to see the masqueraders till their appearance in public."

Then, waving her hand gaily to the little group on the stairhead, she entered Stephana's carriage and drove off to Mr. Constantine's. She sorely needed the half hour's solitude, for her brain was in a whirl. Valerian had come back again, and, unless words stand for nothing, he loved her fondly as ever. Why, then, these misgivings, these vague forebodings? There had been no cessation of his letters, each and all breathing the same lover-like devotion. Again and again he had begged her to trust him and have patience with him. Obstacles stood in the way of his dearest wishes, he wrote. He

was bound to consider Christina and Stephana. He was far yet from being in an independent position. A few weeks after his return, and the future would be made clear.

What troubled Arthura was the thought that whilst she loved Valerian still, she could no longer put absolute trust in him. She could but feel that he was concealing something from her now, and that it was rather Valerian's would-be than real self depicted in his letters.

But love and hope are strong at twenty four, and the thought of seeing Valerian again was at least mixed with pleasure as well as pain. It was a radiant face and a gay voice that greeted Mr. Constantine, elaborately dressed as Time. The old man was in his sprightliest mood.

“The drooping beard and patriarchal staff, wings and garments, are doubtless more be-

coming," he said. "But the skeleton and inverted scythe were more in my way. So you are to be only yourself! A discreet, a feminine choice! Now sit in judgment upon me. Am I veritably Time indeed, the hoary sage, the awful monitor? Do I look too old ever to have had a beginning, and not human enough ever to come to an end? No trace of flesh and blood, no sign of mortality?"

"You are admirable indeed, sir."

"Ah! my speech shall be more admirable still; for I would learn no part. I wanted to be wise for the last time on my own account. 'Twill be a brief utterance, but a pithy, I warrant you. Well, are we ready? I am as impatient as a child before the curtain is drawn up at a play."

## CHAPTER XVI.

A WORLD of roses, a world of sunshine, awaited Stephana's guests that midsummer day, and much more. No sooner had they set foot within her precincts than a bewildering sense of novelty and splendour took possession of them. They were surely bidden to some royal pageant. This show could not be got up for humble folks like themselves.

The avenue leading up to the sombre old mansion glowed with crimson and gold banners, but it was the house itself that had been most transformed. Stephana had lived the life of Italy. She knew how to dress up a place in gala fashion, and, instead of glittering effects and glaring contrasts, had now attained a subdued richness of colour and wealth of

ornamentation really poetic. Gorgeous Oriental carpets and embroideries, garlanded with fresh flowers, hung from every window, whilst the building itself seemed to rise from the midst of a vast flower-bed, so profusely were stands of roses, lilies, and gladiolas placed round about.

If the house was all solidity and sumptuousness, the pavilion on the lawn was all lightness and airiness—a fairy palace, raised for an hour, to-morrow to vanish, without leaving a trace behind. This was also Stephana's handiwork, and she had chosen the pale, glassy green hangings and silvery white decorations with a purpose. Nothing else could be in such keeping with the fresh foliage of summer. Her unsubstantial banquetting-hall looked, indeed, to belong to the world of blossoms, dewdrops, and greenery around it. Some flowery tenement sprang up in the night was surely this for merry-making of fays

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and elves, and no more real than they. Most surprising and enchanting was this dome of pale sea-green, sheeny with sunshine, as it met the eyes of Stephana's guests, one joyous surprise out of the thousand in store for them.

Among the first to arrive was Christina, who knew that Stephana would expect one concession from her. She must see Valerian before the business of the day began, and get through that so-dreaded meeting which was to mean reconciliation. To her great relief, she found Arthura already come, and, putting her hand within the girl's arm, determined not to let her go till the meeting with Valerian should be over. Not even Stephana should compel her to see him alone.

"My dear Arthura," she exclaimed, looking at her from head to foot admiringly, "I am very glad to see you. Now, do tell me, why did you get out of spirits when you were

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with me by the sea? I would have taken you to Italy. I would much rather have kept you. But moody people drive me mad."



"I am very sorry I was moody; but I wanted to see my own people oftener. That was one reason," Arthura said, with perfect candour.

"Well, you may live with me again some day; who knows?" Miss Hermitage replied, growing more and more nervous. She saw Valerian approaching. "Don't leave me, my dear," she added; "there is Valerian. He will like to see you again."

Arthura, knowing as much as she did of her companion's history, understood the reason of that uneasy voice and sudden grip of her arm, but she also wanted a defence against Valerian just then. Miss Hermitage little knew how fain she was to break from her hold, and hide herself. Valerian was

coming towards them, and every step that brought him nearer lessened her self-confidence and collectedness. To use Steppie's expression, it seemed, indeed, as if her tongue would cleave to the roof of her mouth. But no escape was possible. She *must* see him. Yet how little could any bystanders have divined what was going on in the minds of that superb girl, and the spare, pale, bright-eyed old woman leaning on her arm.

Arthur's rich carnations came and went, but blushes may mean coquetry and pleasure only. Outwardly calm and unmoved, she awaited her lover, just as Christina, whilst inwardly burning with feverish dread, showed no perceptible emotion at her son's approach. Alike to the maiden and the mother, this young man, coming up to them with such airy port, meant destiny, bale or blessing, as long as life should last. To outsiders, it was a mere meeting of old friends.



Bare-headed and bowing, with a charming smile, Valerian now stood before them. Christina, of course, had his first greeting.

She moved a step forward, and, for an instant disengaging her hand from Arthura's arm, held it forward, trying to smile, though ghastly pale. Words failed her utterly.

But Valerian's careless ease helped her. Without the slightest agitation, holding his hat in one hand, with the other he took her own, then very gracefully and gently stooped and kissed her on either cheek. A perfect actor in a play could not have done it better.

"I am very glad to see you back again, and apparently well, too—well as ever," was all he said.

Then came Arthura's turn. Here, once more, Valerian's presence of mind was proof against all assail. The lover-like look of intense admiration was followed by a common-place smile, an ordinary greeting, a

hand-clasp. Was she also well? he asked; would Mr. Constantine soon appear? and so on. Meantime, he had given Christina his arm, and by that little action indicated clearly enough the line of conduct he had laid down for them both. There was to be no painful explanations, no bitterness, no useless harrowing up of feelings. But their old relations were to be renewed. It was his part to take care of her and make things pleasant to her, as of old; hers, to be suave and confidential. The pair, whilst thus exchanging kind little nothings, could not in the least tell what was going on in the other's mind. For none can measure his fellow; and here mother and son, though their characters were much alike, failed to guess even at the result brought about by this long and painful separation.

With Christina, atonement for wrongdoing could only take one shape. There was a penalty to be paid, material, actual, of the

earth, earthy. Valerian had been wronged by her ; he should now receive compensation. This was what she had to say to him—no more. The colossal fortune he had so skillfully helped her to enjoy should be his. The mother's duty should be acquitted by her so far. More she could not do ; but this was surely all Valerian wanted of her ; he was not sentimental any more than herself, and so long as they were pleasant and friendly towards each other, life might be smooth enough to both.

It seemed an easy thing to say, and here was the very opportunity. Arthura had turned to embrace Colette. No one was within hearing. Yet those little words—"Of course, I will provide for you!" how hard they were to get out ; impossible, she said to herself, at last.

Whilst this momentary conflict was going on in her own mind, Valerian was occupied

in a similar way. He also wanted to get out a few words, the only expression of remorse that occurred to him ; but utterance did not come.

To Valerian, as to Christina, one kind of compensation for wrong-doing presented itself only. The bitter pain he had given her, the remorseless way in which he had carried out his purpose, did not trouble him ; it was the consequences that he felt in duty bound to atone for—the careless life of distraction so suddenly put a stop to, the pleasant relations with himself disturbed, the worldly discomfort he had brought upon her.

“You look well,” he began, at last, and smilingly glanced at her bonnet of latest Paris fashion and dress of straw-coloured satin, fit for a queen. “Better than ever ! This Italian journey has quite set you up, I hope.”

Miss Hermitage gave an uneasy little laugh.

“I am well enough,” she said. Then—it

seemed to her a last chance—she got out the words that would have had a cruel sound in the ears of any but Valerian—

“I don’t think I shall die yet. But when I do, what is mine will be yours, of course. I wanted to tell you so.”

Valerian did look moved, although, in reality, he was more nervous than herself.

“I want you to live and be happy. Never mind me,” he stammered forth. “I am very sorry I disturbed your peace.”

“Let us go to Stephana,” Christina exclaimed, adding, in an undertone, piteously, “Say no more. We will never talk of these things. We will forget that they have happened. But here comes Stephana, and looking quite a picture !” she cried, with a sense of relief.

It was once more Valerian’s turn to collect himself and use extreme presence of mind.



There was Stephana, his affianced bride ; there was Arthura, his love, his secretly betrothed—and not a word must he breathe by way of explanation or excuse to either, as yet. The threads must be unravelled to-morrow. The palinode belonged to another day. Stephana was his benefactress, and he had betrayed her only that he might the better serve her interest. Arthura was his love, and would forgive the temporary lapse when she learned all.

So when Stephana had embraced Christina affectionately, he moved forward, paying, as it must seem to outsiders, hardly more homage than was due from such a guest to such a hostess. The beautiful hand held out so cordially was just raised to his lips. That was all.

“Welcome, most welcome home!” cried Stephana, smiling sweetly. “What welcome can be good enough?”—she turned gaily



towards Christina—"since you have brought Italian sunshine, and you"—here she looked affectionately at Valerian—"you have brought tidings of a Promised Land."

"If such a reception did not satisfy us, we must both be hard to please, indeed," answered Valerian, already feeling as if the most difficult part of the interview were got through, beginning to breathe more freely. What if Stephana, in her excess of gratitude, had bent down her fair brow to be kissed also! And Arthura standing by! Oh! that this day, with its pitfalls and toils ready to enmesh him on every side, were well over! this one day only, and the rest he was ready to encounter.

Stephana, all composure and calm joyousness, divined nothing of what was going on in his mind. With an unconscious look of confidence, she now let one fair white hand rest for a moment on his arm. To Valerian

that exquisite touch seemed like a fiery grip ; he felt himself turning sick with fear and apprehension.


But Stephana merely said, with a charming smile, " Ask Arthura to show our beautiful preparations, whilst I act the cicerone to our cousin."

She now gave her arm to Christina. Colette had vanished. Valerian found himself with Arthura, alone.

He had never seen her look so superbly, so distractingly handsome, and although the moment before out of countenance and out of heart, he regained self-possession now. Arthura, at least, knew nothing of his imbroglio, and the mere fact of being able to whisper what he would in her ear seemed to make all things smooth.

" May I come and see you to-morrow at your own home ?"

" Will not Stephana want you ?"



He turned round sharply and looked her full in the face, but nothing was there, he thought, to dismay him. The question was put out of girlish curiosity, perhaps not without a touch of natural jealousy, nothing more.

“And what if half-a-dozen to-morrows?”

The sweet sense of returning intimacy, and the conviction that nothing would be easier than to throw himself on Stephana's magnanimity, filled Valerian with growing self-confidence and ease. He was about to utter some lover-like rhapsody, when the blare of trumpets was heard at the gateway.

“That is the signal! Mr. Markham and his thousand have arrived!” exclaimed Arthura. “We must not lose a moment.”

## CHAPTER XVII.

TRUE enough, it was the blind magician and the troop he had enchanted with his wand, every soul now so triumphantly marshalled under his banners having been brought to believe, Markham himself could hardly say how, "in the Golden Age which lies before us and not behind."

That inspiring sound of trumpets, usually associated in our minds with State pageantries that have no meaning, but echoed the tremulous joy stirring a thousand hearts no more accustomed to excitement of such joyous kind than were the ears of these happy people to such transporting music. As one crowded car after another, each a veritable bower on wheels, came within the precincts, the

band, drawn up in readiness, struck up a loud and triumphant strain. Then the garlanded and flower-bedecked carriages passed under a handsome triumphant archway, showing in golden letters the motto, "God bless the People!" whilst the banners floating on every side bore other inscriptions as new and as appropriate. What a welcome for those who had never in all their lives been welcomed before!—who see even the most solemn occurrences of life daily passing before their eyes, without any accompaniment to stamp them on the imagination and the memory. Alike, birth, betrothal, marriage, death, the greeting after long years, the supreme valediction, all these come and go as mere breaking of daily bread and girding up of the loins for daily toil.

But to-day the order of things was reversed, and, instead of princes, Stephana had bidden sovereignty of quite other kind with royal

circumstance to enter her gates. Want and misery were made to smile, the brows of penury wreathed with flowers, and torpid pulses quickened for the first time with wine.

“Welcome! Welcome!”

This was the word that, amid a thousand more of the same joyous significance, met every pair of eyes but one of the happy hundreds soon peopling Stephana's grounds in every part. Markham was compelled to realize the bewildering scene by the light of inner vision only. Perhaps, indeed, he really saw more than any other present, every presumable feature in the scene being thus heightened by the imaginative faculty. The loud, merry strains of music, the animated voices, the ejaculations of wonder and admiration on every side, must have affected him in this way, as, led by a little child, he made the circuit of the place, “to see everything,” she had said, heedlessly, although, indeed, her

artless descriptions made him see them, and far more.

"Now," she said, "a beautiful lady is coming towards us."

"You have already described so many beautiful ladies," Markham answered, smiling.

"Ah! This one is the most beautiful of all," answered the child. "She has hair black as a raven's wing, and something that shines in it like a little star, and her dress is all white with another star that twinkles on her bosom. I think it must be an angel."

"I think so, too," Markham made laughing reply. "But I know that lady. Take me to her."

In another moment Stephana was by his side, and, gaily dismissing the child with a kiss—she felt in the mood to embrace every one to-day—she took his arm.

"I must keep you a prisoner," she began to Markham. "You are master of the cere-



monies, you know, and there is no little marshalling to be done. In the first place, how are we to get all these good people together for the masque? It will be given at once, and, as soon as all are seated, I have ordered cool drinks to be handed round."

"If sitting room is provided, have no fear," Markham answered, drawing from his pocket a tiny musical instrument. "This is how I call my birds together," he said, straightway putting it to his lips.

The sound was not loud, but penetrating, and it reached the farthest recesses of the grounds. Like birds flocking at the cry of the caller, came Stephana's guests, thronging round the pair, as motley a crowd as could well be conceived. Seven Dials can but trick itself out for a holiday in the best it has, and the bits of finery displayed here, not only by the womankind but by the men, were outlandish enough. Here might be

seen gowns of a fabric and pattern in high favour several generations ago ; fashions of older date still, with flowers and faded ribbons that must have been worn by brides long since laid in their graves and forgotten. There was something extremely pathetic in the persistence with which anything that could be called personal adornment had been seized on. Stephana's guests—all, be it remembered, poorest of the poor—could not, when bidden to a feast, go a-shopping, as the phrase runs. They could only furbish up such gala garments and gauds as they already possessed—a brooch here, precious heirloom, in moments of direst want pledged and redeemed a dozen times ; a watch-chain there, which had seen the same vicissitudes ; with white frocks for the children, of a kind of whiteness still after years of laying-by in London smoke ; and ribbons, dyed and re-dyed at home, knotting every little girl's hair. If the garb of

these poor London people was pathetic, telling a tale of privation and endurance that the more fortunate part of humankind cannot realize, much less imagine for themselves, still more so were the faces of the wearers. Sorrow and pain spare none, care is written at some time or other on every brow ; but what painter can depict, what pen can describe, the corrugations of pinching poverty, the pallor of want, the indelible marks of perpetual struggle and grinding anxiety, read here ? To-day a smile played on every lip, and a look of almost childish beguilement was seen in every face, but the suffering of a lifetime cannot be forgotten in an hour. Even Stephana could not work such a wonder. These emaciated countenances were to be freshened and these enfeebled frames invigorated in the happy life beyond sea—but not in a day, not in a year even, barely in a lifetime. 'Twas a work for the all-healer, Time.

The crowd had now gathered round Stephana and her companion, listening expectantly for what was to come. As yet this wonderful day was an enigma and a mystery to them, but by little and little they felt that all would be made clear.

“My fellow-guests,” began Markham, feeling that a little pleasant raillery and banter would be well-timed, “we all know that when we are bidden to a feast something is expected of us. People do not give us champagne and creams for nothing! Well, we have come here, first to be made wise, and next to be made merry, and any one who can help us in either matter is called upon to do so. Now, our first business being to be made wise, we have all straightway to take our places demurely in yonder amphitheatre, and listen, without uttering a syllable, to what we shall hear. When the beautiful performance is over, any one who will stand

up and say a few words about it, and try to explain it to his neighbours, will be listened to attentively. Then—but there are so many features in the programme that I cannot enumerate them all. Enough to say that the most important, after the fairy spectacle we are now going to witness, is the banquet. Our hostess will preside, and will say a few words to you at the close. Away, then! Let us hie to our places.”

In an incredibly short space of time the vast pleasure-grounds were cleared of the last straggler, and, like birds congregated together before the autumnal flight southwards, Stephana's happy people, in one compact crowd, awaited the coming spectacle.

There they sat, smiling and wondering, unaware of the fact that they themselves made a spectacle of deepest interest to some of the bystanders. For this artless bewilderment, this intense, almost childish satisfaction

at the prospect of amusement, painted on every face, was moving to behold. The very word amusement conveyed as yet but a dim and indistinct meaning to most of them. They felt much as a handful of their numbers had done, when sent the year before on an excursion to the sea-side. The sea, the sea, what could it be like?

To-day, the feeling uppermost in every mind was of curiosity. A fairy masque, an allegory with music and singing, what was that? Perplexed and delighted, every one of them for the nonce turned into five-year old children, they sat with eyes fixed on the elegant stage before them, at present all silence and emptiness, soon to be turned into a scene of enchantment.

The little ones, found room for on the knees of their elders, were not more flushed with eagerness than they as the blissful moment drew near. Even sherbet and straw-

berries lost their charm, and by-and-by impatience began to be manifested in a few timid taps of walking-stick and umbrella.

"Won't they ever come?" asked one child, on the verge of bursting into tears.

"What can they be about?" said another.

Impatience, indeed, had reached the highest pitch, when, at last, the signal was given, the band played a short introductory movement, and the beautiful show began.

Stephana had purposely withheld anything in the shape of a programme or elucidation. The best part of a poem, or of any imaginative work, she said, is that part we all find out for ourselves; and if our Allegory is meaningless without such aid, no amount of explanation can make it clear.

And now the masquerade began.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

It was not at all likely that Stephana's audience should be alive to the elaborate structure of her allegory, and the thought upon thought involved in the leading idea. What they saw and realized, as one gorgeous procession after another, with music and banners, now passed before the proscenium, and took its station on the stage, was this :—

First, heralded by joyous trumpetings, came an emblematic personage, representing Britannia, superb matron and sea-queen, drawn in a car, all the insignia of empire there, and the accessories familiar to us all given on an imposing scale. As she was slowly and majestically wheeled to her station on the right hand of the stage, a chorus of little boys, dressed as Jack Tars, sang a



patriotic sea-song, and a gigantic Union Jack was sent flying, as if by magic, high above the heads of the car.

The band now struck up, "Hail, Columbia!" Next came Columbia herself. She, as behoved imperial daughter of an imperial mother, was fair and stately to see. Her brow showed a circlet set with thirteen stars, emblematic of the Glorious Thirteen; whilst the shield she bore was richly emblazoned with the Indian's head and the figure of Liberty, the famous motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, given in letters of gold.

Following Columbia came a gay and motley procession—little black boys and girls in bright dresses, Red Indians in their war-gear, and many other impersonations. They bore the national banner, and as they crossed the stage, sang lustily in chorus—

"The star-spangled banner, long may it wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!"

Rich and suggestive was the appearance of the stage now, the right side being occupied with the allegorical pageant of Britannia, the left with that of Columbia ; and it seemed to the enraptured audience, although as yet not a word had been spoken by either of these majestic personages, that the spectacle was complete. Was it not enough to behold such an impersonation of Britannia, the foster-mother of every man, woman, and child present, in the spirit, if not in the letter, the arbitress of every fate, the mistress of every destiny, the love of all ? Fitting, too, was it that the no less majestic daughter should be there, too, that blooming Columbia, emblematic of the new empire and the new destiny awaiting generations unborn beyond seas.

The pageant, however, was but half over ; and scarcely was the hubbub of admiration and bewilderment hushed, when a third pro-

cession was ushered in to the sound of slow and solemn music.

No part of the performance surpassed the representation of old Father Time. There was Mr. Constantine, bald as an egg, a halo round about his head, a long white beard drooping on his breast, on one shoulder the emblematic scythe, whilst from both drooped wings. Very venerable and picturesque he looked, and very impressive the utterances that now dropped from his lips.

"Hail, sweet ladies and honest gentlemen all!" he said, as he leaned on his staff in the middle of the stage, and looked up with a keen, searching smile. "Ah! when Time was young, 'twas but a few who got these gentle names; and now every mother's son and daughter of you claims 'em, and rightly, too! Let us be jealous of 'em; for they mean nothing, or what should belong to all—independence, a high mind, a spirit to

protect the weak. Every Eve shall be a lady, every Adam a gentleman, ere old Time's beard is half a yard longer !

“ Hearken, dear babes and bantlings ! 'tis old Father Time himself speaking ! Ye won't hear him any more. Give me, then, two ears and an understanding, and ye'll go forth the wiser. My little babes and unbreeched urchins, my prettysucklings and stammerers ; for is not the oldest white-head grandsire among you as a freshly-weaned poppet to Father Time, who never had a beginning, and will never have any end at all ? Well ” (here he struck his staff on the ground), “ one thing first let me hammer into your understandings. These modern times have scotched a serpent, of most venomous bite, too. Its name is Privilege. Privilege is now under the heel of honest men. The future of the world shall belong to ALL ! No more prerogative, except of inner manfulness and sterling worth ; no more

rank, but of merit and virtue! a toothsome speech! So look well before and after. Let the woman's standard be the man's also. Keep your minds pure, your bodies chaste. Be pitiful to the beast. Let each individual's soul be as the just ruler of a fair kingdom. For heed the admonitions of Father Time! Man is born no slave to evil, but *free to choose the good!* Hail, Columbia! worthier daughter of a worthy mother! Father Time turns to thee with the rapture of a young lover a-wooing. No star in the heavens fairer than the Thirteen that glitter on thy brow, since they symbolize the right of mankind over its own destiny, and the right of one the right of all! Take these children; school them to independence and virtue. Whip the foolish and the lazy. Place a fool's cap on the dunce. Spare not the birch. But, dear goddess and schoolmistress of the whole wide world, let none shame thee, himself, his name, his age,

his country! Father Time's all hail, amen, and final God bless you!"

The most poetic and enchanting part of the performance was Steppie Sadgrove's impersonation of Hope. For weeks, nay, months past, she had conjured up this much-dreaded, yet much-coveted scene, when sadness should drop from her as by magic, and for once, if for once only, she should be transformed into Hope's living embodiment. Nothing but a feeling of exhilaration was needed to work the necessary outward change. Steppie's gentle features, almost infantine still in their tenderness of outline and delicacy, had little look of care or maturity about them. A rosy smile, a dimpling of the cheek, a soft brightness of the eyes, and the wonderful transformation was complete.

As Steppie now appeared, surrounded by little Loves, rosy, cherubic, like herself intoxi-

cated with joy, she seemed to tread on air, and to be enamoured for the moment of rapture and bliss. One idea, and one only, was present to her mind, one phrase echoed and re-echoed by her memory :—

“ And Hope, enchanted, smiled and waved her golden hair.”

A lovely line it is, and lovely it made Steppie look, as it took almost demoniac possession of her now. That fair yellow hair of hers was tossed ecstatically as the tresses of a Bacchante, her blue eyes shone with mild lustre, her lips were parted in a rosy smile. She seemed to herself to be smiling on all the world, to have come down from some upper region on purpose to smile, and for one brief moment, it did seem to her as if she should go on smiling to the end of her life. Surely, no transitory joyance, no hallucinatory exuberance was this, but a passage from one condition of being to

another, a kind of resurrection to a new, more sunny life.

Steppie, looking round her and seeing all these sallow, careworn faces, lighted up by her own smiles, catching the reflex of her own matchless mood, for a moment surpassed herself. She was drunken, but not with wine; her heart was made glad by a stimulant of less gross kind, as she now smiled away the sadness of her own and a thousand hearts!

"Oh!" she whispered to Arthura, a little later, when, all excitement over, she wiped away the joyful tears from her flushed cheeks; "oh! I should be so happy, if I were not so miserable!"

It were hard to say what part of the spoken programme delighted the audience most—Britannia's farewell charge to her children and the stepmother to whose care she now consigned them; Columbia's reply, worded in



the same magnanimous spirit; the weighty monitions of Time; or, lastly, the sweet, joyful utterances of Hope.

They understood every word, so at least they thought, as one by one the speakers advanced to the front of the stage and spoke, in stately monologue—Britannia's parting admonition, Columbia's welcome, Time's oracular utterance, Hope's artless oratory. What else could all these mean, but that they were to grow better, wiser, and happier in the new world and the new life awaiting them? One long word sounded very much like another in their unaccustomed ears, but the mere sound was inspiring and oracular. Yes; Scripture itself was no clearer. They were going to a better land, and on this side of the grave, not the other. A Providence, after all, had been watching over them, and the good things of life were not henceforth to be the exclusive portion of the rich

—that is to say, the envied. With the same smiles of childish, wondering enjoyment, they now dispersed to enjoy the flowers and shrubberies till the banquet should take place. This pleasant interlude, no less grateful to hosts than guests, lasted upwards of an hour without anything that could be called an incident. The children fed Stephana's swans on their miniature lake. The young girls studied the beautiful dresses of the ladies, the old folks sunned themselves, the men curiously inspected the mechanical arrangements of the theatre and pavilion. All became silent, demure, and happy.

Of the banquet, no need to say a word. There was nothing enigmatic or oracular here, only plain, unmistakable enjoyment and instruction of a solid kind. Every one of the unaccustomed cates before them conveyed not only a pleasure but a lesson. The best possible lesson in cookery, indeed, is a bidding to

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a well-cooked dinner, and nothing we can preach about moderation and good manners so effective as example. Herein was matter for thought for the hundreds of guests whose meals had been all their lives taken anyhow, sometimes not taken at all, and, under the best of circumstances, so poor and scanty as to afford hardly a gratification.

The banquet drawn to a close, and some toasts drunk with those light, sweet southern wines that just exhilarate and nothing more, it was Stephana's turn to say a few words.

Lovely indeed she looked as she stood up to perform this duty, her dress snowy, diaphanous, diamonds flashing in her dark hair and on her bosom; just behind her, the pair forming a striking contrast—red rose and white, Arthura in her sumptuous dress, with its rich crimson roses, warm carnation in her cheeks and on her lips, whilst Stephana's pearly complexion was paler than ever.

It was a simple speech enough that Stephana made, but it went straight as an arrow to every heart. She said exactly what a kind, wise friend should say under such circumstances, nothing approaching the sentimental, all crystal, clear, forcible, to the purpose.

As she came to an end, she glanced at Valerian and paused. Then, blushing rosy-red, she added, her voice clear as a bell, reaching every ear :

“ I have a last word to say, and I am sure it will please you all to hear it. I have already mentioned one true friend of mine and yours,” here she inclined her head towards Markham, sitting near ; “ I must not leave off without speaking of another, since to him both you and I are equally indebted. You must know whom I mean—this kind and indefatigable friend, who went a pioneer into the new world to select fair lands for you, who will, ere long—that I dare undertake to promise—

visit you to see how all is prospering ; nor will he come alone. We shall have your hearty prayers and good wishes meanwhile, I know, for—I may say it to such good friends and well-wishers—this trusty helper of mine is to be something more. When I visit you in your new happy world, it will be as his wife.”

## CHAPTER XIX.

THE hour of separation had come, and yet Stephana's visitors lingered, as if unwilling to break the spell that bound them to her presence. All knew that there was now nothing to stay for—the last carmine streak had vanished from the western sky, the dews were falling, the signal for departure long ago given ; but nobody stirred an inch in the direction of the gateway.

It was a sweet place of peace and thanksgiving just now, this old-fashioned lawn, and as Stephana contemplated it, her heart exulted within her. It seemed as if her dearest wishes were realized at last, and as if life had no more to give. Such moments of ecstasy happen to most of us once in a lifetime. Not the mere

cup full to the brim of joy is raised to our lips, but a drop of elixir worth many brimming cups.

First and foremost, came the joyful conviction of having proved a kind of Providence to a thousand human lives. Thorns might spoil some of their roses ; in these new waters 'twould not be all smooth sailing, but she had put each man, woman, and child in a fair way of holding up the head, showing indeed the true manly, true womanly within, enriching them mentally and bodily so far that they need envy none. Next to this satisfaction came the feeling that two lives at least, and these two knit to her by ties of kindred, were made better, if not consciously happier, by her means. Christina lived now in the light of truth, and need no longer dread imminent retribution and remorse. Such atonement as it was in her power to make, she had promised ; and whether or no she thought herself

happier, she was so past question. The weight of secret wrong-doing was lifted from her conscience. She could look her fellows in the face.

Over Valerian Stephana rejoiced most of all, she said to herself, now that Valerian's soul was hers indeed, and that not only had she awakened a conscience in this somewhat shallow nature; she had also touched his heart.

Long ago he loved her, but he was now in sympathy with her, a result she set much more store by. Passionless herself, she had never yet been moved by any man's passion. Valerian's unswerving devotion, however, and uncompromising acquiescence in her wishes, did now in reality awaken a warmer feeling than mere cousinly affection. She was intensely grateful to him for all that he had done for her, and drawn to him by the sacrifices he had made on her behalf.



All that he had to give was hers—time, inclination, talents of no mean order. Surely, surely, she should be satisfied, and not exact a loftiness of soul accorded only to the few!

It seemed to Stephana just then that it was unreasonable to do less than try to love this poor Valerian a little in return for loving her so much. And his life hitherto had been a series of disappointments and mortifications. She must endeavour to be a Providence to him also, for who needed one more?

Of Markham Stephana thought tenderly and serenely. Here all was security and assurance. Markham's magnanimous soul could well be left to take care of itself, and if she could not requite a no less magnanimous devotion, she could comfort herself with the thought that at least he had inner consolations.

If, then, consummate happiness is any mortal's portion for a brief spell, Stephana

tasted it at that moment. As her eyes rested on the quiet, yet animated scene before her, they filled with blissful tears. This twilight calm, the fair day shutting like a flower, the fairer dawn to come—all these awakened within her breast a sense of rapturous contentment, the deeper because it was impersonal.

Whilst she lingered thus in a little summer-house on the highest ground of her domain, for a moment isolating herself from the scattered groups below, soft strains of music caught her ear. It was the music of human voices only, and the strains, low almost to indistinctness at first, soon swelled into a rich volume of sound that reached from one end of the garden to the other.

The song that had been begun on the spur of the moment by one of the company present is familiar to most, and, if anticipatory, had, nevertheless, a peculiar appro-

priateness. If strange in the ears of some of these London-bred children, the melody was not difficult to catch, and prompters were at hand.

“Shades of evening, close not o’er us,  
Leave our lonely bark awhile;  
Morn, alas ! will not restore us  
Yonder dim and distant isle.”

So ere long the sweet and simple song, a song no more, but one vast harmony of more than a thousand voices, filled the place, and caught the attention of careless passers-by in the streets without. At first pensive and tender, soon rising to deep, passionate strength, the artless melody, with its moving words, might well bring tears to eyes unaccustomed to weep except for misery.

Not one, however, of Stephana's guests was in tearful mood just then, as they gave vent to their feelings in the lines.

"When on that dear land I ponder  
Where my old companions dwell,  
Absence makes the heart grow fonder.  
Isle of Beauty, fare thee well!"

There was just a touch of sentiment, but hardly sorrow, in the minds of the emigrants as they now filed past her in little bands, directing their steps towards the garden gate, their minds being at last made up that they must go.

On the longest day of the year, who can say when night begins? and in the liquid pearliness of this exquisite twilight, every feature of the picture was clear as in broad day.

There was Valerian, having Christina on his arm, whilst they halted listening to the song, Valerian joining in it with a hearty voice. Not far off was Markham, led by a little girl, yet all the time leading the whole. And there was Mr. Constantine, his last word of wisdom spoken, yet so far overcoming his

weariness as to wait for departure. And Steppie was there, a child among the children, a toddling thing held by each hand, all singing as if their very lives depended on it.

But where was Arthura? The thought had hardly crossed Stephana's mind when she heard her name called, and, looking up, saw her standing near.

What a contrast the two presented! Stephana radiant, yet calm as this silvery twilight; Arthura a-tremble, a-glow with passion, her cheeks red as the roses in her hair, her eyes bright as the jewel glittering in Stephana's.

Had not Stephana been intensely absorbed by her own tranquillizing thoughts, she must have noticed the extraordinary excitement, almost wildness, of her companion, reined in for the moment, but evident, nevertheless.

Stephana was too happy to be alive to

anything going on around her just then, and out of the fulness of joy could not resist taking the girl's hand, even kissing her as a sister might have done in some ineffable moment that belonged to both.

"Oh!" she cried, "look at these happy people; not one of all these hundreds of hearts but is mine! How rich, how more than blessed, am I to have such love, such benedictions!"

Arthura stood for a moment in painfulest conflict; the word was on her lips which would, for once and for all, shake these joyous confidences and dispel these blissful illusions. How could she say it? How could she hold her peace?

It seemed to her as she paused thus, a thing of evil passions, hateful to herself, love like hate within her bosom, that it was a bounden duty to turn and flee. What business had she among Stephana's hopes, beau-

tiful as these large midsummer flowers shining out of the pearly light! Better, far better, to bury her own miserable passions, and let those who would delude themselves with dreams of love and loyal affection! To Arthura's warm, robust nature, there was sacredness as well as mystery about this pale, sweet Stephana. It seemed to her as if, like the mystic lady of the poem, "she had no companion of mortal race;" and now, with this burning hatred at her heart, and almost a craving for common vengeance, she still hesitated to speak out.

Had no Stephana been by, and a deadly weapon at hand, she felt that she could have rushed forward to stab her lover's false heart as he stood within earshot, outwardly calm and smiling, inwardly, it must be, at warfare with himself. The soothing influence of Stephana's presence, the cool evening hour, the mixed pathos and solemnity of these part-

ing strains, for awhile checked Arthura's vindictive mood. But at last grief and indignation would have their way. Stephana must know all. She could not keep silence a moment longer.

"Stephana!" she cried, breaking from that sisterly hold, "all is not as you think. If therè is wizardry in your eyes, use it now. Discover the fallen angel, the one black heart among all these, and smite him to the ground with scorn where he stands!"

Stephana started and looked at Arthura doubtfully, wondering if indeed she were smit with sudden craziness. But the truth of the girl's wild words was written in her face, and in one other that shrank from their gaze now.

Arthura's words he had hardly caught, but the meaning of this strange scene flashed across Valerian's mind then. Arthura's look of passion, Stephana's sad astoundment, the



silence, the shock, were not to be misinterpreted.

In a moment his position became clear to him. There was no place for a Valerian beside these true hearts. He had wronged both past forgiveness. Except for his mother, he was alone. She, at least, could understand the weakness and crookedness that had let him into this pitfall. She, at least, could never reproach him with cowardice and double-dealing. She was disarmed. They were quits. Valerian stirred not; his white face told no tale in that dim light, but had Stephana and Arthura been able to read it some compassion might have been awakened on his behalf. For the first time in his life he was now brought face to face with himself, with meanness, with falseness, with worldliness; yet in spite of all these, a higher aspiration, an instinct of better things was his. He needed something better than

the old life begun over again with Christina, deprived of all that had before made it bearable—Stephana's friendship, Arthura's love!

Valerian stirred not, although there seemed poltroonery in inaction. Once he moved forward as if impelled to say a word on his own behalf, but the faces of the pair were averted. They would, perhaps, turn from him as from a serpent, perhaps never speak to him again!

"Come!" he said to his companion. "We are not wanted here any longer. Let us go home."

"Without a word of good-bye to Stephana?" asked Christina, in a tone of surprise.

"At least, we are not going to America," he said, as he made the retort, feeling drearily and bitterly how much wider and deeper the gulf between him and these two noble women than the broad Atlantic.

Then he hurried her away, passing unobserved through the crowd of miscellaneous guests to the carriage that awaited them at the gateway.

So, whilst Markham marshalled his little band towards their gaily decorated cars, the burden of their song still kept up by those who remained in the rear, Stephana and Arthura were left more and more to themselves. And soon, in that heavenly summer twilight, fragrant with lilies and roses, pale silvery stars gleaming out of the pearly heavens, they found themselves alone.

The singing had now died away altogether, and the last stragglers had gone, Stephana's beautiful rose-garden abandoned to its mistress.

With a sudden impulse, half of craving for sympathy, half of deep womanly compassion, Stephana now caught the weeping girl to her bosom, and the pair were fast

locked in each other's arms. To both it seemed a moment of supreme valediction. One wept pure womanly tears as if her heart were breaking over a lost lover ; the other as an angel over a perjured soul she had tried to redeem.

## CHAPTER XX.

At the eleventh hour Markham had yielded to Stephana's request that he should accompany her little colony to their new world. It seemed to him a small concession to make after so many, and as much of his heart as was not with Stephana's self was in her work. He went off cheerfully, therefore, feeling perhaps a secret sense of relief at the notion of being out of England for the next few months. Nothing definite had been said on the subject in his hearing, but he could not doubt that on his return he should find Stephana wedded to Valerian. The thought was unendurable.

The vessel had sailed, then, and Markham with it. So at least Stephana believed. She

had seen him indeed embark in the docks. She had received a pencilled farewell from the shore. She imagined him now in mid ocean, surrounded by the dear people he so loved to entertain, telling stories interminable, as a minstrel of old.

What was her amazement, a few days after the hoisting of the *Blue Peter*, to hear Markham's voice in the corridor!

It was late in the evening, and she sate alone in her favourite room, an upper chamber, from which she could not only hear the turmoil of the great world of London, but could see, as if from a mountain top, the ceaseless ebb and flow of the busy crowds below. Generous spirits should ever live on airy heights, and thus take in larger vistas of the human bee-hive at work, of which they form a part.

Stephana, catching on a sudden the voice of her blind friend, rose joyfully, and went out

to greet him. Never in all her life had she felt in such need of him as now. She almost forgot the inexplicable nature of his appearance in her pleasure.

"You have come back! you have come back to me!" she cried, as she led him into the room.

"Could I stay away?" he asked. "You remember my promise made nearly two years ago? You have but summoned me, and I obey the summons."

"I did not write. There was no means of communicating with you," she answered, amazed. Then on a sudden, recollecting what had transpired on another parting in this very house, in this very room, just seventeen months ago, she cried, joyfully, "I remember, I understand! Yes," she answered, taking one of his hands and letting him feel the tears he could not see, "I have wanted you, my friend; I am very desolate."

“ There was more than a vague feeling of loneliness. There was an invocation, a mandate. But let me tell you everything, and you shall then say whether or no I have been dreaming,” he said, stirred with deep, unutterable contentment. “ Listen then to my story. We were at anchor off Plymouth, two nights ago, about this time, and in another hour or two the pilot boat was to return to shore with letters, and we were to be fairly under sail. I sat alone, my head bowed on my breast, lost in thought, whilst the rest amused themselves with watching the lights of the town and general bustle. As I sat thus, the confusion of voices around me seemed to die away on my ears, and in the silence and stillness—imaginary of course, for the hubbub of voices and commotion was indescribable, only in my reverie I heard them not—all was hushed about me, then, for a little space ; and on a sudden, it was as if the voice were close by,



I was called by name, and the voice I heard was yours."

He raised his head with a look of intense, passionate joy, as if light must break upon the darkness for an instant, and for once, for once only, the face of his beloved would be revealed to him.

"Oh!" he cried, "I seemed to see you then as I seem to see you now. There were tears on your cheeks, as there are at this moment, and your voice was one not of farewell, but of greeting, of earnest entreaty and appeal. Once, twice, thrice, I heard the words. 'Markham, Markham, will you too abandon me?' they said. Yes, you cannot deny it. They were thine. The moment so vehemently desired, so sweet to think on, that I said it should more than console me for my misfortune, had come. In spirit, thou hadst claimed me."

Stephana was silent; a nobler emotion

than pride checked her utterance. All that sympathy and compassion had said so long in Markham's behalf, a deeper feeling was saying now. Yet she hesitated; other promptings made themselves heard also.

Even in her forlornness and disenchantment she did not feel wholly to belong to herself, much less to Markham. Valerian's lapse seemed a warning that all wedded to the general weal should stand alone. The work she had set herself to do needed less love than a steady purpose to aid her own, and uncompromising self-abnegation to keep her company.

"Oh!" she said, imploringly, leaning her whole soul on his, trying to make him understand these inner conflicts, "what does the rest matter? You and I surely should not think of ourselves?"

"At least, then, tell me that I was not dreaming. Two nights ago, at this very

hour, you did indeed, in spirit, call upon my friendship, my love?"

Ah me, for Markham, that he could not see that fine blush mantling her pale cheeks! The sigh he did hear, and the just perceptible tremor in her voice told him more.

"Your summons must mean all or nothing," he went on. "You have discovered Valerian's inadequacy. All is over between you and your cousin."

Stephana was silent.

"I felt all along that it must be so," Markham added. "Heaven forbid that I should judge another! In one point only I hold myself worthier of you than poor Valerian. My soul lies open to your own as a book. Read it by the light of a midsummer day. No word there my own love must not see."

"You are my best, dearest friend," Stephana murmured. "Is not that enough?"

When the best thoughts of two beings are in perfect unison, there is a marriage of souls."

"But a marriage of souls is no bond," Markham answered, almost bitterly. "Your home may not be mine. Any accident may divide us to-morrow. I measure the height and depth and length and breadth of the sacrifice I ask at your hands," went on the blind lover. "You shall not make it in vain. You will give heavenly consolation to a darkened life. Your best requital will be the joy of another."

"If I yield, I should belong to you, to the calls of duty no longer," Stephana urged.

"May not love sometimes be highest duty? And think not you can live alone! That cry of desolation I heard two days ago still rings in my ears. Stephana, beloved! you need me even as I need you."

He stretched out his hands to find her

own in the night perpetually about him, and Stephana did not draw them back. He had come to her in a time of such desolation that she could not choose but cling to him. And for the first time, perhaps, she realized to the full the loneliness of his life. Compelled ever to trust himself to others in the least little thing, to be led hither and thither as a child, the beauty of the human face, the miracles of art, the joyous, shifting revelry of the visible world, hid from his gaze for ever and for ever and for ever. Was she not bound to become as the light of the eyes to this much-tried, ineffably patient soul; whilst striving to do good to many lives, to be a guardian angel to this one? Lastly, Stephana could but feel that Markham was the only being in the world who had ever really understood her. The subtle spiritual gifts she felt conscious of were matched here. All the influence she could

exercise over her fellows, Markham could wield too, but by different means. That voice of his had power to fascinate and to soothe, even as her own eyes were said to do ; and by some strange faculty akin to those with which she was endowed, he could read her thoughts and anticipate her most secret wishes. Oh ! was there not something better, higher, deeper, even than love here, some voice of destiny, which is the voice of God ?

And in that moment of uncertain joyous hesitancy, Stephana's thoughts went farther still ; for let it not be supposed that the act of turning a thousand poor London artizans into landed proprietors seemed to her more than a stepping-stone to better things. This was a mere pièce of beneficence, the gratification of a magnanimous whim. Her notion of doing good had a deeper root, and was based upon keener insight into the

truth of things than hand-to-mouth philanthropy.

And Stephana saw all things clearly now—the mysterious call to England, its reference to Valerian, the meaning of the heraldic emblazonry, the blank scroll. Her mission had been to restitute Valerian in his right, to unburden Christina's bosom of secret wrong, to reconcile mother and son, and last, yet first, to awaken in Valerian, the heir of the Gossip-Hermitage family, a conscience for the adequate disposal of his fortune.

All this was done. Was she not free now to think of herself? Was not her deep, unconfessed love for Markham, a call that should be followed also? And to attain her purpose, could she have a better helper than Markham, the man of stainless soul, of more than womanly tenderness, of courage that dreaded no ridicule, no rebuff? Yes. They were surely brought together for good.

Valerian ! Valerian ! Was it of such poor stuff the world's reformers are made ?

" You have said it," she said ; " I do need you. Not only now, but always."

It was surely no unmanliness that brought the happy tears to Markham's withered eyes. His hitherto immedicable ill seemed healed. He needed the light no longer ! Enough of brightness, sweetness, and beauty were now to be his portion. For a moment, he took her lover-like in his arms, and pressed his lips to her forehead.

" Kind God in heaven !" he whispered, " what have I done to be made so happy ?"

" Nay," Stephana retorted, as she sat down by his side. " Say, rather, what shall I do in return for being made so happy ? if indeed the service to which you are binding yourself can be called happiness at all ?"

Markham smiled on the sweet task-mistress he could not see, and would fain



have prolonged this lover-like confabulation, would have tried to win yet another promise ere he went.

But in love, as in friendship, Stephana swayed him to her will. Love is made up of mystery and expectation, and she knew well enough that as lovers they should never be happier in each other than now. Seven years, ay, and seven years more, he must serve his apprenticeship to love, if to her it should seem good !

## CHAPTER XXI.

IF Stephana had vanquished herself, another victory, harder still yet remained to be won. That first disillusion of her life had made her afraid of love, and at the root of her wavering towards Markham from the first was this feeling of distrust. His love for her was of long ago, but, although strangely attracted to him, not only by the tenderness of his nature—have not all rare men won the tenderness of a woman?—but by his misfortune, she had ever repelled it, fearing lest her own, if once awakened, might suffer shipwreck. A woman can understand but one man in the world, her lover; and Stephana feared that even Markham's character might not bear that fearful scrutiny, that

terrible ordeal, the life of two that becomes the life of one!

Now, she doubted no longer. Markham's existence was to be consoled by the sweetness of home, domesticity, nearness; and in return he was to be her helper, adviser, fellow-worker. At least, if she gave much, she should receive more in return.

But that other reconciliation on which her mind was bent? How should she make peace between Arthura and Valerian? The palinode was to be spoken, the kiss of peace accorded; but by what means was a real reconciliation to be brought about?

A few days after the interview with Markham, Valerian came to see her. He had nerved himself up to this interview, which was to be the prelude of one with Arthura. He must see her, must pour out his soul to her, and only Stephana could help him.

"Let us be friends, my cousin," were Ste-

phana's first calm, assuring words. "And let us both forget and forgive. There cannot be another syllable to say."

She held out her hand, but Valerian did not raise it to his lips. He sat down opposite to her, haggard, ill at ease, remorseful.

"Perhaps you are right," he replied. "Little use to talk of what is done and can never be undone. Thank God, we are cousins!" he added, with a grim smile. "You are bound to exercise Christian charity towards me, if for no other reason, because I am of your own blood."

Stephana laughed. How Valerian's nature showed itself in every deed and word!

"To my thinking, that were a reason for hard judgment, at any rate implacable justice," she made reply. "But what conceivable right has any human being to judge another?—unless when brought face to face, as criminal and judge."

"You will not turn your back upon me, then?" Valerian asked, humbly. "You will not wholly give me up?"

"Are you not my kinsman?" said Stephana, again smiling. Her cheerfulness somewhat took Valerian aback. "Relations are bound to each other for weal or woe. Have I not received you to-day, friendlily as of old?"

Valerian was dumb.

"We have turned a new page. Let neither of us ever so much as once glance backward," Stephana said. "What you have to do now is to make peace with Arthura and regain her confidence."

"Will you help me?" Valerian asked, fully understanding his position with regard to Stephana. They were cousins; they would never be anything more. "Because, if you will," he said, eagerly, "I shall take it as a sign that you forgive me, and trust me still."

Stephana perused him narrowly.


"Of course, I will," she said at last; "and of course, you will prove worthy of trust where Arthura is concerned," she added, quickly. "Do, dear Valerian, let us now, by common consent, bury this ignoble little past, and think of what is coming. This very day I will go and see Arthura."

Then they talked of many things, of Christina, of her plans, of her gratification at having seen Arthura again. Stephana had to tell Valerian to go, at last, so relieved was he to be able to talk to her with perfect openness. And when he did go, it was with a much lighter heart than he had come. Stephana's lofty-minded pardon arose, doubtless, from entire indifference to himself. That was humiliating, but it smoothed the way. It made welcome possibilities seem near.

That same day, Stephana drove to Russell Square about the time she felt sure of

finding Arthura. The pair had not met since the passionate confidences of the festive evening. It often happens that the complete outpouring of heart and heart is followed by a feeling of shyness. As far as Valerian was concerned, neither Arthura nor Stephana could reveal anything more ; and perhaps both felt a little sorry, and a little womanly shame, at having already said so much. Arthura's proud secret was out. She did indeed, did once, love this shallow, plausible, vacillating Valerian with all her heart ; and Stephana, in her indignation, had shown with what hopeful affection and interest she had, for a short space, clung to him, and with what whole-heartedness she had believed in him.

When they met to-day, therefore, it was with a shrinking on both sides, and, at least on Arthura's, a disinclination to personal talk. Hardly were the first greetings over, before Stephana declared her errand. Sitting close



to Arthura, holding the girl's hands in hers, and fixing on her those beautiful dark brown eyes, that seemed to soothe even when they inspired a feeling almost akin to awe, she said, smiling quietly—

“You will never, never guess what I have come to say to you.”

Arthura lifted one of Stephana's hands to her cheek, and kissed it passionately. The only strong, beautiful, righteous thing in the world just then, the girl thought, was this fair, mystic creature, whose business seemed the consolation of others.

“I have come to say that you must marry Valerian,” Stephana added, still in the quietest voice, whilst she watched her companion.

“Ask me, rather, to marry the coward that has run away from battle; but not Valerian! And he would not dare to do it; he would fear me!”

As Arthura uttered these words, with red



cheeks and unusually bright eyes, it did seem, indeed, as if any one who had wronged her might tremble with fear then. Just such passion and outraged feeling as hers turn trembling, faint-hearted maidens into vengeance-dealing Diræ. Her tall, slight figure was drawn up, her young face dark with angry passion.

“If I am wicked, I will do other penance for it,” she cried, weeping bitterly. “And I will follow your behoof, Stephana, in all else. An evil spirit possesses me now. I almost feel as if it would be sweet to make Valerian suffer. Were he drowning before my eyes, I should, perhaps, withhold the rope that might save his life. But I will do him no harm if you keep him out of my sight, only I must hate him in peace for a little while.”

Stephana waited till the passion should be over without a word. Arthura went on, weeping—

"I did shameful things for his sake. I lied, not with my tongue, but with my acts, out of love for him. How kind Miss Hermitage was to me, to us both! And all the time we were deceiving her. You, too; you were kinder than the angels, and he let me, he made me, act lies to you. Oh, Stephana! never talk to me of marriage at all! There may be other Valerians in the world. I can be happy as I am."

She threw herself on her knees by Stephana's side, still shaken with passion.

"I will ever love you as if you were something more than an ordinary mortal," she said, laying her head on Stephana's bosom.

Whilst she lay thus, Stephana leaned over her tenderly, as a mother tending a feverish child, lifting the hair from her hot brow, fanning the hot cheek. But it was the quiet magic of her eyes that did at last, and by degrees, calm the girl's wild mood.

After a time the passion spent itself, and she lay in her friend's arms, pale and listless, an image of sorrow, but of vindictiveness no longer.

"I am very wicked. You must drive the demon out of me," she said, looking up into her companion's face, as if sure of reading there, if a sentence of punishment, with it absolution.

"You will marry Valerian," Stephana repeated, as she spoke feeling the thrill of dismay that ran through Arthura's frame. "Listen to me," Stephana said, using all the fascination she was mistress of, compelling Arthura to look into the depths of her persuasive eyes; "Valerian would fain make reparation. Will you not let him do so?"

"We should hate each other. Life would be intolerable to both of us."

"Hear me out," Stephana interposed,

gently, "and when you have heard to the end you will see that I am right, and that you are wrong. Valerian was never in the spirit, only in the letter unfaithful to you, and for such unfaithfulness I was greatly to blame. I never for a moment dreamed that he might be in love, when I acceded to a request made years before he knew you. There was weakness, duplicity, in Valerian's behaviour, if you will, but not changeableness. He never loved any woman but yourself. Our marriage would have been of friendship only. Think for a moment on the various motives that may actuate a man with which love has nothing to do. Valerian had his way to make in the world. There were many reasons why, at that juncture in his affairs, he could not openly go against my wishes. His very love for you drove him into double-dealing. He wanted to secure my good will—which meant worldly fortune

—just because he loved you, and wanted to marry you.”

Arthura listened unconvinced. Stephana went on, more encouragingly still—

“I have seen Valerian. He has poured out his heart to me as brother to sister, and here he must be true since every word is proved by his deeds. It is in my heart, not yours, that resentment should exist, since he made use of my kindly feelings towards him in order to serve his own purpose. I feel no rancour. He never cared for me at all, except as a possible benefactress. I shall always be as ready to help him as I have hitherto been.”

Then she added, with a generous glow on her pale cheeks—

“You must marry him, dear Arthura, if you have any heart and soul at all. All is now made up between him and his mother. He will some day inherit her enormous

wealth ; but the only value it can have in his eyes now is the prospect of sharing it with you and yours." She said, smiling insinuatingly, "Think of it, Arthura. Those little step-brothers and sisters you love so dearly are to be made participators of Valerian's good fortune. He will act the part of father to them."

"Did he say so?" asked Arthura, with a childish expression of contentment.

"He did, indeed. And there is another consideration which I think you will understand. Would you have Valerian's wealth squandered as Miss Hermitage squanders hers? Will you not help him to use his fortune as a conscientious, high-minded man should? You are not worldly, I know; you do not care to be rich?"

"Ah!" Arthura said, the bright, audacious spirit re-asserting itself at last, "I see it all, Stephana. You are using wizardry. You

will make me marry Valerian ; and when we are rich, you will make us do exactly with his money as you like."

"Would you mind that?" Stephana asked, playfully.

"Not if the children had new shoes when they wanted them, and there was never a baker's bill," rejoined Arthura, under this new aspect of affairs ; and cheerfulness seemed possible once more. Valerian, the benefactor of Benjamine, Walter, and Baby, was suddenly transformed into a bearable person !

## CHAPTER XXII.

ALL that a penitent lover could say for himself Valerian said next day, as he sat opposite the proud, listless Arthura. She had not at first a word to utter, but glanced at him from time to time with a timid, deprecatory look, much as if she were asking herself whether, indeed, he could ever become again the Valerian of old to her.

It was not till Valerian began to dilate upon the children that Arthura realized the future he was building up was to be her future as well.

She even smiled as he spoke of Walter's prospects—how the high-spirited boy should become a naval cadet, and have the dearest wish of his young heart realized in time,



namely, to be a gallant sailor. Then he talked of Benjamine and Baby. They should have as much money spent upon their education as she desired ; a dowry should be assigned to each. Nor was Steppie forgotten. Her small means should be enlarged. She should have more change, more country air, and no pinching, no bills. Then, when lover-like eloquence had done its utmost, and he also sat silent and listless, she asked, very plaintively—

“ Will you be good to me ? ”

What a rebuke those artless words conveyed to Valerian's mind ! They revealed to him all that he had lost, all that must so painfully be regained, as, step by step and little by little, he might, perhaps, in some remote future, win back that generous, trusting affection.

There seemed nothing more to say, but how much he knew remained to do ! To

Arthura was assigned the hard task of forgiving bitter wrong ; to Valerian, one harder still. For forgiveness is oftentimes accorded in a day, an hour, but the reparation for wrongdoing is the up-hill toil of years.

“Take me to see Miss Hermitage,” said Arthura, on a sudden ; and Valerian drove her back at once, leaving the pair together. He knew well what she had to say to his mother.

“My dear Arthura,” cried Miss Hermitage—for so she was called still ; the secret of a lifetime was to accompany her to the grave—“I am very glad to see you, now that you have recovered your spirits.” And with some surprise, though no rebuke, she let the girl clasp her round the waist, and kiss her again and again.

“Dear, dear Gossip ! I did want to say something to you. It was very wrong of me to deceive you about Valerian——”

“Talk of something more entertaining,

my dear," said Miss Hermitage, characteristically; "I hate disagreeables. When you are married to Valerian, you must live next door, you know; I must be amused. Why are there so many dull people in the world?"

"A world full of dunces is better than a world full of demons, anyhow," said Arthura.

Miss Hermitage laughed.

"Always an unexpected answer from you, and most people say exactly what you expect. It is so wearisome. Why do they do it?" she said, querulously.

"Because there is no unexpectedness in their minds, I suppose."

"Ah!" laughed Miss Hermitage again, "I am not over-fond of my cousin Constantine. We have quarrelled like cat and dog all our lives. But I would give ten thousand pounds to make him ten years younger. He is so unexpected."

Arthura's fingers still toyed with Miss

Hermitage's elegant ruffles, faultless head-gear, and white hands, on which sparkled diamond rings.

"I wish I were like you!" cried the girl, forgetting for the moment all about Valerian; only recalled to the humorous side of the old life with him under their patroness's roof. "So neat!" she went on; "so exquisite! so perfect to look at! You will let me dress you for grand occasions, as I used to do, won't you?"

"Well," Miss Hermitage said, good-naturedly, "I suppose the next fine clothes I have to buy will be for Valerian's wedding. You will do him credit, my dear, and I cannot see why you two should not get on together without scratching each other's eyes out. You don't expect more, I hope. But, Stephana! She will change her mind a dozen times. An angel from heaven would not satisfy her! And I know well enough," Miss Her-

mitage added wickedly, "Stephana's machinations. When I am gone, she will make Valerian play philanthropic ducks and drakes with my money. She is bent upon that! Well, it won't matter to me. The world may wag as it pleases when I am in my grave."

"Don't talk of your grave, Gossip," Arthura said, kissing the neat, ivory-complexioned face.

"Why, what does it concern you where I am?" Miss Hermitage said, with her little cynical laugh. "It is impossible you can care about me."

Arthura looked shocked.

"I always love people who are kind to me," she said, with a flushed face and tears in her eyes.

"Had you not better go and talk to Colette?" said Miss Hermitage, growing uncomfortable. "She is dying to see you. But don't make her cry."

"Was Mademoiselle Colette in love with Valerian, then?" asked Arthura, again mischievous. •

"How preposterous you are! But you know Colette always sheds tears when she hears of marriages. She is so sentimental."

True enough, when the warm-hearted little Frenchwoman had received Arthura's palinode also, she did burst into a fit of weeping.

"You will love each other dearly, won't you," she murmured, as she shed tears of joy, "like Ursula and John Halifax in my favourite novel—won't you, now? Christina says it is all twaddle-dee-dum and twaddle-dum-dee. But I am sure I am right and she is wrong. How can two people help being fond and happy when they have taken each other for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse?"

"I don't see that it follows," answered Arthura.

"But how beautiful it sounds," went on Colette, "to have and to hold, in sickness and health. You will be like Ursula, won't you? And if Valerian is not precisely a John Halifax, you will try to make him so?"

"I won't promise till I have read the book," Arthura made reply. She was not addicted to the circulating libraries.

"Humph!" said Mr. Constantine, when the news was conveyed to him. "As usual! The unexpected about to happen, the unlooked-for brought about! Well; woman must fall in love and fall out of it. Men must take to themselves wives, and sit for the one inevitable, unflattering portrait! But, really now, my Prospera matched with Mr. Pliable, and my beautiful Mystic with any of mortal kind! 'Tis past all bearing. Why is love ever a will-o'-the-wisp leading into quagmires? But we wise heads may prate. No one listens to us. The wise marriages

are still made in heaven, and the whole history of woman is summed up in the tale of Titania and the ass's head! There must be a compensation somewhere if we could only find it out."

Steppie of course had her comments.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she cried between laughing and crying, "I could dance for joy, although my heart is as heavy as lead. Stephana happy! Arthura happy! The poor children provided for! No more bills! Every one happy but poor me. And I am happy, if I could but know it. But I never shall know it; never, never!"

THE END.





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